

THIN AIR

A Novel

By

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Human Nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of.

Jane Austen (1775-1817)
EMMA - Chapter 22

Prologue

Tina Petty was my half-sister. The media-conscious lead singer of the pop group *Terminal Blonde*, she made her initial foray onto the UK pop scene in 1981 with the single *I Thought About You Yesterday* (doo-day-doo-day). Further chart-toppers, *Taking My Place* and *Don't Talk To Me*, paved the way for her top ten album, *Thin Air*. Toddler-pout and breathy, soar-and-swoop vocals were Tina's stock-in-trade. On stage, she was frantic and provocative, in interview, inarticulately outspoken. She held easy opinions on everything from fashion to Third World debt. Her sense of publicity and formulaic rebelliousness (and not the group's music) kept her constantly in the limelight. She was twelve years older than me and I worshipped her; for her astonishing beauty, her quick tongue, her single-minded vendetta against life in general, and the fact that she said she loved me more than anyone else in the world, including John.

By 1983, the world was tired of Tina's self-aggrandisement. Her increasingly desperate and public attempts to re-launch herself: arriving at an exhibition of final-students' work at the Royal Academy wearing a transparent dress; endorsing a book (*Whipped Cream. One Hundred Erogenous Recipes*) which involved her being photographed, her body painted with a chocolate-sauce bikini, rendered her the laughing stock of the Industry. The depression that had dogged her since childhood returned with a vengeance. Mood swings. Cocaine. Alcohol. To the tabloids, she was fair game - *SAD TINA IN HOSPITAL. Star is 'depressed and emotionally exhausted'* - just another pop cliché.

In those early days, having a sister – even a half-sister – regularly appearing in prime-time chart shows and teenage-magazines made me the object of awe amongst friends. At school, I was treated with reverence. One of the nuns had once acquired a piece of the True Cross on a Vatican tour. She had impressed the school easily with its significance. As the Tina Petty's kid sister, I had upstaged them both. It was generally understood that Tina's divinity had been made flesh, in me. I exploited my status for all it was worth, distributing snippets of scandal with apostolic gravity. Down the bank by the railway cutting, I drew deeply on donated cigarettes and enjoyed my sanctity.

As the bubble burst, I was unceremoniously defrocked. In June 1985, I got myself expelled. Agi, my mother, was beside herself. Under doctor's orders to take a break, she left England to spend a week with a guy she had met at the Pig Kill the previous Christmas. I went to stay with Tina and her boyfriend, John, in Redwater, where, I was told, I should

stay with my sister, though in truth, Tina was often busy, and the task of taking care of me most often fell to John. I never minded. Once or twice in a lifetime, one meets one of those people in whose company it is simply impossible to be bored. John was one of those people.

During the week I spent with Tina and John, I became aware of Tina's precarious mental state. The atmosphere was tense. I think, as a result of this, John encouraged me to spend time with Francesca Dashwood, an old friend and patron of his who lived in the big house nearby. The last few days of my stay had been monopolised by Francesca – seventy-four hours of specialist garden centres, butterfly farms, tea in Stately Homes, absurd, hilarious sleuthing after wild mushrooms (which, in the end, we never found). God knows how many bottles of wine she opened. I've never known much about wines, but assumed that when they were more than twenty years old they must start getting pricey. Francesca tipsily uncorked bottles, while others remained, half-full, on the dining table. During that week, she decided I was something of a music prodigy and had repeatedly rifled through the dog-eared folios in her piano stool, presenting me with favourite pieces of Chopin, Beethoven and Debussy to sight-read on her boudoir grand. I remembered her clicking her tongue with delight as I worked my way through the Litolf *Scherzo* (which I scornfully dismissed as a lollipop). She'd insisted I give an impromptu living room recital to Freddie, her husband, and a couple of women from the village.

The last-but-one day of my stay, Tina and John had the most almighty row. I had no idea what it was about. Tina was completely hysterical: wailing, lashing out with her fists, calling John all the names under the sun. Phil Jacobs, Tina's manager, was staying. He tried to break them up. Tina broke his glasses. I was sent to Francesca's. There I rang Agi. The following day, at lunchtime, she collected me and took me back to London.

That same evening, John reported Tina missing to the police. At the next low-tide, her pink convertible was spotted, nose-down, smashed on the rocks beneath Boddle Head cliffs. An intensive search followed: divers scoured the treacherous currents, helicopters scanned the estuary and the sea beyond, but no body was ever found. Suicide was presumed, though no note was discovered. Tina was only twenty-seven.

At first, the papers were not kind. They suspected her disappearance as some sort of publicity stunt. Phil Jacobs gave a teary exclusive to one of the tabloids: *RUM ON COKE. Tina Petty's Heartbreak Battle with Drink and Drugs*. As the weeks rolled on, it became clear that Tina was not going to return. An anonymous 'friend' leaked a story to *Tonezone Magazine* about Tina's troubled childhood: *The Private Pain Behind the Public Face*. Tina was recast in the role of victim.

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High publicity appeals for Tina's return were given by Phil Jacobs. John was advised by his lawyers to refuse to be interviewed. Spurred on by what they took to be his insouciance, reporters dug for details. It wasn't long before they found what they were looking for: a criminal record. As a teenager, he'd once been involved in a pub brawl knifing and had subsequently done time in a juvenile detention centre. Suddenly, John found his already-ailing acting career on the line. This was not the kind of kiss-and-tell tabloid morsel, which might give him a dash of chic. This was serious. A rare and precious TV part that was as good as a done-deal for John, was mysteriously re-cast to a different actor. The role was that of a wife-beater.

Tina's record company capitalised on the publicity. The acoustic album they had been working on at the time of her disappearance - *Tina Petty, Unplugged* – had been hastily assembled. It reached number six in the album charts, and her three existing albums had been re-packaged in mysterious runic covers with additional, hitherto unreleased, material. There was merchandising. A photograph taken of Tina in front of the pyramids had been blown up to poster-size - the mysterious flux of light over her head was identified by a TV mystic as ectoplasm. There was a limited-edition, gilt-framed hologram (only 500,000 made) that would make Tina's image melt into the words *Thin Air* depending on which way you held it to the light. There was an unwatchable biopic – *The Girl Who Wanted It All*.

It was in her disappearance that Tina finally achieved cult status. Fans began decoding spurious secret messages. Apparently, if you played the track *Thin Air*, backwards, you could make out the words *Oblivion Badrakali* (the Hindu goddess of death). I once tried it and broke Agi's hi-fi. Much was also made of alleged death-clues secreted on the cover of *I Thought About You Yesterday* (Tina holding a blood-stained marionette, roses in the foreground that, if you held a mirror underneath them, seemed to spell out a shaky RIP).

Tina's disappearance marked the end of a chapter in my life. During Agi's stay in her native Hungary, Uncle Feri had asked her to marry him. On the first of August, 1985, having sold most of our furniture, we caught a flight to Budapest. Agi gave my father the job of selling the house (*the least he could do, considering*). He readily agreed. I think he was relieved: the move rendered all obligations towards us impractical.

After I graduated from the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest, it was Francesca who had encouraged me to return to England to do a post-grad. She'd ransacked the library for

prospectuses on my behalf. Once I was settled at music college, she would wheel up magnificently. Tea at the *Lanesborough* (on her, thank God), *La Boheme*, *Degas - the Forgotten Drawings*. I remembered Francesca, tireless in an explosion of pearls and scarves, manoeuvring me towards a pregnant-looking Henry Moore bronze. (*Genius, darling. Quite inimitable*). Hot winter breakfasts at *Fortnum's* where she would embarrassingly and loudly pronounce Marxist truisms, the merits of Greek names for children and the sad demise of unprotected sex. (*Here's to Daphnis and Chloe! Chocolate, darling?*) Canute-like, with traffic, animals and people, she would boom at me to be careful. She was the only person I felt I could confide in about Tina at that time and she tried as best she could to fill a gap. I will always be grateful to her for that.

In 1993, Tina was officially declared dead. Under the terms of her will, I received a lump sum – more money than I had ever made before or since – enough to clear my overdraft, buy a piano and put a largish deposit down on a small, South London flat.

The sparkling music career Francesca had predicted for me never materialised. Competition for repetiteur work was fierce. Recitals rarely yielded more than token payment. Of the two soloists I accompanied, one got married and had a family, another moved to the States. Eventually, I fell into giving piano lessons and, when a part-time music lectureship came up at the local FE college, I jumped at the chance of a steady income. I lost touch with the circle of music acquaintances I'd kept up with since college and soon there was no one left to remember my former ambitions. Only Francesca, with her well-meant enquiries and encouragement reminded me of my disappointment and it was probably for this reason that, over the years, contact with her became more casual. We met occasionally when she was in London. Mostly we communicated by letter.

I was fifteen when Tina went and in those days kept a diary. A big black book that John had once given me with a lock on it and *Dear Patch - Merry Christmas 1984, love from Count Karoly* written on the flyleaf in Gothic script. There was even a felt-pen blood stain. John had once landed a part in which he played a Transylvanian nobleman. He'd made me feel terribly important when he confided to me that he could not do a Transylvanian accent. I, of course, had Agi's off to a Tee. We had spent hilarious hours the week before rehearsals in coffee shops and ice-cream parlours speaking like B-movie vampires. I still have the book. Fifteen years on, the stiff cardboard cover is a little warped, and the pages, crinkly.

It was the summer of Tina's disappearance that I realised growing up meant trying to forget things, not remember them. A record of my life seemed unnecessary and a little depressing. I haven't kept a diary since.

PART ONE

Friday 14th June 1985

Yesterday morning, I told Sister Michael to fuck off.

It was probably that slag, Bernadette Reilly who split on me. She's hated me ever since the time she was trying to wind me up by doing Agi's Dracula accent and I accidentally whacked her with my hockey stick.

Someone said it was me who wrote 'Sister Ignatius is a lezzie' in the bogs.

After Mass, Sister Michael said "Emma Petty, you are a nasty, spiteful girl". She noticed the 'Satan Lives' T-shirt under my school blouse. She clutched her rosary and said I was evil.

That was when it slipped out. I couldn't help it. In no time she was on the phone to Agi. Said they'd been very patient ... they had no option ... blah - blah - blah ...

Last night, Agi droned on and on about my exams. Did I realise I'd just ruined my chance of a good education? I don't care. She kept asking me what she's done to deserve this, and how it wouldn't have happened in Hungary. It was when she said I was turning out like Tina and meant it as an insult that I went mad. I told her I wanted to turn out exactly like Tina and if Hungary was so great, why didn't she do us all a favour and fuck off back there. My pocket-money's been stopped. Bitch.

Dyed my hair black this afternoon. Shaved around my ears and neck to give myself a Goth Mohican. Used a whole can of Agi's hairspray to get the middle bit to stand up. Got my nose pierced too. Hurts like hell. When Agi came back, she went mental. Literally. I had to call Dr Chandler. He injected her with something and said she needed a holiday. He suggested I go and stay with my father. That was Agi's cue to start blubbing again. She spent the next hour muttering about painted tarts and alimony.

Phoned Tina this evening. She was in bed (she's always in bed), but John was there. He tried to make me laugh - he did all my favourite accents: the sicko scientist, the Nazi matron, the Chicago gangster. I wasn't in the mood. John said he didn't mind me crying and that he would stay on the phone as long as I wanted. The pips went - he had to call me back. I told him all about school and Agi and everything. He asked if I wanted to come and stay with them for a few days in Redwater. Fucking ace. When I told him about Sister Michael, he did his butch cowboy voice: Hang 'em high, kid, hang 'em high.

Chapter One

The sun was seeping through a gap in the curtains, back-lighting the pink capillaries in my eyelids. I belched. Vermouth and Garlic. Oh God. I pulled the duvet over my head in an attempt at blocking out the radio.

Monday morning. A house in Camberwell had been fire-bombed. Two children feared dead, and a third in a critical condition.

(Headache. Claggy armpits.)

Industrial action had brought the Northern line to a standstill again. Some woman from a soap I never watched had died, peacefully, at her home in Surrey.

There was a doleful rattling from one of the radiators that needed bleeding. I rolled over. No Dominic. He'd been doing a gig last night.

Knife attack in Stockwell. A *Care in the Community* schizophrenic was helping the police with their enquiries.

Next door, in the café that was being renovated, some workmen were shouting. "Not there, you pillock. Over here."

The time was coming up to eight forty-five (weather and sport).

Shit. Shit. Shit. Overslept. Again. I immediately began fabricating a ludicrous story about food-poisoning. I leapt out of bed, trod on a foil carton, which contained the remains of last night's takeaway. Wiping the Vegetable Madras from my toes with yesterday's knickers, I hopped to the telephone and called College. Maureen Batcup, the secretary answered.

"Maureen" I said with slightly hysterical good-humour.

"Emma? Where are you? The Team Meeting started five minutes ago."

"Sorry." I grabbed the post as it came through the door. Two bills and a bank statement. "I'm going to be a bit late."

"The Head of Curriculum's been asking after you."

Not food poisoning – too ubiquitously used. Death in the family? Bit creepy and difficult to keep up. Flu? I used that last week and had to keep answering the telephone in a ridiculous, nasal voice. I cast my eyes around in desperation. The worn carpet. The woodchip walls. The brownish stain on the ceiling from last summer, where the bloke upstairs had overflowed his bath. He'd moved. Eureka.

"Flood" I said.

“Sorry?”

I looked at the pile of dirty clothing that prevented the bedroom door from shutting.
“Er. Washing machine’s flooded.”

“Again?”

Last term. I’d taken three mornings off to await the repairman. Maureen’s memory was ineffable. I feigned indignation. “Carpet’s ruined.”

Sigh. “I’ll tell Roger. He won’t like this, you know. Not one bit.”

Roger was the Head of Music. We shared the Monday morning GNVQ class, or rather, he appeared for the first five minutes, took the register, and then scuttled off past the frosted glass partition for a fag.

I ripped open the letter from the bank.

“Could you at least provide some idea of how late you will be?”

I scanned down to the bottom of the final sheet of the statement. Fuck.

“Pardon?”

“Oh tennish” I gabbled hurriedly, refolding the pages and trying to force the whole wadge back into the envelope. “An hour. At the most. Maybe less.”

I suddenly realised I’d told an impossible lie. How on earth could I clear up a flood and be at college in an hour?

“Quick as you can, please” said Maureen, unimpressed.

In the bathroom, I brushed the fur from my teeth and turned on the shower. Water oozed through the limescale in uric rivulets. Once dressed, I made coffee, poured the grounds down the sink (the bin had needed emptying for two days) and lit a cigarette.

“Air pollution” the radio complained “is high for the time of year.”

“Sorry I’m late, everybody” I said to the class. “Alec, could you take your feet out of the waste-paper basket? No, now, please!”

Chantelle and Stacey broke off their conversation about the relative merits of the prisons their brothers were in. “Oh God, not that Hallelujah thing again” Chantelle whined, stifling a yawn. She had dark rings under her eyes. Even her butterfly tattoo looked tired. She worked cash in hand, four nights a week as a topless waitress.

The class issued a sympathetic groan.

This whole fiasco had been engineered by Roger, part of his sucking-up-to-the-directorate scheme. He'd endured the Chief Executive's wife gushing about her performance of *Rejoice Greatly* at the Clapham Choral Society's Christmas soirée. Next day Roger had bounced into class announcing we were going to perform the *Messiah*. As a part-timer I had no say in what we performed. By the third week Roger's ambitious vision had withered to four excruciating pages of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. The previous lesson, a Special Needs lecturer in the adjacent classroom had complained that the noise was distressing her students.

I picked up the music and handed it out. No-one even bothered opening it. Someone farted. Laughter rippled through the classroom and Celine, the pretty blonde who'd had breast enlargements for her eighteenth birthday, yelled over her shoulder "Matt, you fucking animal."

"Celine, can you remember which line you were singing?" I asked.

"Don't you mean snorting?" an unpleasant, acne-scarred girl muttered and sniggered at her own joke.

Celine turned and hissed "fuck off, Cassandra."

My legs were beginning to ache, and I felt sick. I studied Roger's list. It meant nothing. Half the class had left after the first week. The college still had them down as enrolled to keep attendance figures looking respectable. The class could barely read music and Roger was a truly terrible lecturer. His classroom management skills were infamous. He'd spent most of the previous term off sick with various mystery symptoms. "Nerves" whispered colleagues. "Burn-out" buzz-worded the Line Manager. "He hates the bloody place," Meeta, his frayed wife, said when I bumped into her once in the high street.

I looked for our only alto. "Quiet, please" I screamed. "I said quiet!" I raised my hand in a pitiful attempt at taking charge. "Where's Lorinda?"

Stacey looked up from her magazine. "She's having an abortion."

I rubbed the pit of my stomach, sat down at the piano and hammered out the introduction. A few people began droning haplessly over the general chatter. My shoulders started shaking with uncontrollable laughter and I threw down fistfuls of wrong notes.

"This is crap," screamed Stacey, sometime later. I noticed the Special Needs lecturer gesticulating furiously at me through the little glass porthole in the door. I looked at my watch. Ten minutes to go. Roger probably wouldn't bother coming back. My head felt ready to explode. Who was I trying to kid? "I know" I sighed, closing the piano lid.

The response was predictable. "Then why are we doing it?"

I told them, honestly, that it was Roger's idea.

"Well, if he likes it that much" said Chantelle, with faultless logic, "why doesn't he buy the fucking CD?"

By three o'clock, the skies had turned cloudy and an indecisive drizzle dampened the air. I was having a fag in the covered way (*Fire Exit – Keep to the left*) between the Art block and the Citizens Advice Bureau when my mobile went.

"Emma?"

"Dom, where are you?"

"Home. Just got back."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." I heard beeping as he entered something into the computer. "You?"

"Awful." I took another drag, and then explained "half-price cocktails last night down *O'Flahertie's*," (an MDF and melamine themed atrocity), and GNVQ this morning."

Another beep. "Right."

"How was the gig?"

"Fine."

"Many people there?"

"Few." Silence again. Conversations with Dominic were often like this, with me gabbling on idiotically to stop the gaps. The whole process had something of the ouija-board about it. "Someone threw up on my amp," he said, at last. I could hear he'd stopped tapping at the computer keyboard.

I tried not to giggle, knowing he wouldn't find it funny. "Does it still work?" I asked, sounding concerned.

"No, it's fucked." There was silence. Beep.

I stubbed my cigarette out in the raised flowerbed. "I'd better go. Class starts in five minutes."

I was just about to press the 'end' button, when Dominic said "Oh – Em. I nearly forgot. Francesca Dashwood just phoned. Can you call her?"

Francesca phoning out of the blue like that was fairly unusual in itself, though not unheard of. She sometimes (though recently, more rarely) came to London to attend private

viewings and would invite me along as her guest. Francesca would park me in a corner of the gallery while she bloused about drinking champagne and gushing about the pictures. Afterwards, we'd go for espressos at one of those Italian places that have been around since the fifties, and chat.

I left College at five on the dot and fumbled in my bag for my phone. A sharp-suited businessman, pinning his mobile, chin to shoulder, was hailing a taxi. ("We'll just have to lay them off," he was yelling. "They leave us no choice.") He ran straight into me. "Watch where you're going, young man."

The haircut had been a mistake. I blamed Dominic entirely. His habit of pointing out, completely ingenuously, girls he thought looked good, left me feeling a bit C-plus-could-do-better. Style is one of those things teenage girls acquire around the onset of puberty and something I must have missed, along with trigonometry and making a smock-top, the term I had glandular fever. The previous week I had decided to re-invent myself. When I came back from the hairdressers and asked Dominic what he thought, he was silent. Eventually, not quite looking me in the eye, he said "well, it's certainly different" and dived back into the safety of *Sampling Today*.

The air was heavy with exhaust fumes. Traffic on the high street was bumper-to-bumper. I blocked my right ear against the noise. "Francesca?"

"Patch darling."

"Dominic said you called," I yelled. For a minute, I thought my mobile was on the blink, because the line started crackling. Francesca had disappeared, somewhere in the black void between satellite and earth. "Hello?" I shook it. "Fuck."

"Darling?"

I jumped to avoid a cyclist who was beating the jam by swerving onto the pavement, and stepped on a loose paving stone. The water hit my ankle with a splash. "Sorry, I thought I'd lost you."

"Patch, I've been for some tests."

A juggernaut edged forward. Its brakes squealed and hissed. "What?" I shouted.

That was how I found out. On a wet Monday evening. Yelling into my mobile over the roar of the rush hour. *Speak up – I can't hear you.*

In her last letter, Francesca had talked of headaches and dizzy spells. The cause had, at last, been identified. A tumour. A few months at the most.

Chapter Two

I hadn't been back to Redwater since Tina's disappearance. Curious, as the train crawled the last half a mile, I pressed my nose against the cold glass. The place had undergone a lot of development over the past fifteen years. Where there had once been fields, there were executive housing estates. *The Hayrick. Glebelands. Badger's Knoll.* An industrial complex now stood on the site of the old quarry. Redwater, once a chocolate-box, Jacobean village, with half-timbered houses and Norman church, had been all but swallowed up in the suburban sprawl. The train pulled into the station. I was dying for a fag.

All change, please. All change. This train terminates here.

As I hitched my rucksack over my shoulders, I wondered what awaited me at *Fallowfield*. A wheelchair. Drips. Pill-bottles and syringes (in spite of a lifetime of piercings, I still go funny when I see a needle). I pictured a frail Francesca, pontifical, full of edicts about filling every moment. (Would I have to learn to fit an IV?) I thought of her walking into the dusk.

Customers are reminded to take their baggage with them.

I nosed the door of the guard's van with the front wheel of my bike. The subway stank. There was the usual graffiti about who was frigid, who was fit, who to call for oral sex. Rather surreally, at head height, someone had spray-canned *minge*. I wheeled my bike through the ticket hall. The small, country railway station I remembered now sported a new tourist information desk, electronic timetables and the sort of reinforced glass through which you have to scream your destination. In the entrance hall, a crepe paper witch munched a bag of crisps, swinging her legs under the chair. Batman ran up and down the slippery tiles, swirling his cape and buzzing like a hyperactive bumble bee. It was only when I looked up at the digital clock that I registered the date. October 29th. It would be Tina's birthday on Sunday. She would be ... she would be ... Forty-one? Forty-two? I couldn't begin to imagine it.

It was probably because I was thinking about Tina for the first time in ages, that a young woman with blonde hair, flicking through the pages of a magazine caught my eye. Only momentarily. As I drew near, I saw that the woman's face was long, not heart-shaped. Her eyes were brown. She wore a nylon blouse with fussy bows. Not Tina by a mile.

I sat on the bench, next to the taxi rank and lit a cigarette. Next to me, a junior entrepreneur had made a Guy-Fawkes out of bubble-wrap and string and was taking

advantage of the Halloween trade, begging for pennies. Anything under 50p left him mouthing nastily after the donor. A car pulled up on the double-yellows. The driver, a man in early middle-age jumped out and waved to a sulky-looking teenage girl with a pierced lip who had been mooching in the doorway. "How's Gran?" he asked, as he loaded her holdall into the boot.

"Fine," said the girl.

"Good journey?"

"Okay." She sounded studiously bored.

He slammed the boot. As she moved forward under the street lamp, he squinted at the purple tendrils sticking out from under her baseball cap. "What the hell have you done to your hair?"

She pulled the cap down over her ears. "Shut up, Dad."

I smoked my cigarette right down to the filter as I remembered my last journey to Redwater, fifteen years ago.

John and Tina arrive at eleven. John looks a bit surprised when he sees my new hair. "Ah, Igor," he yells suddenly in music-hall Bavarian, "I have created him a mate."

I call him a prat, a little offended, and give him a hug.

"You look great," he says and loads my bags into the boot. He is sun-tanned. It suits him.

Tina stays in the car. She's wearing sunglasses. When I kiss her through the window she says "gently, Patch, I've got a headache."

Agi starts crying as I say goodbye, and asks John to "take care of her little one."

"Jesus Christ" I mutter from the back seat.

"Of course I will," he says smiling over-normally at Agi and then casts me a glance in the rear view mirror. His eyes widen and he cackles demonically: "she was never heard of again."

Tina doesn't say much on the first part of the journey. She chain-smokes, blowing it over in John's direction and dropping ash on the carpet. I watch the movement of his shoulders. He is wearing a basketball-vest. FAIRFAX and underneath 46.

"So, Patch. Is there anything you want to do this week?" John asks.

I shrug. "Dunno."

"Francesca's looking forward to meeting you."

“Oh God” I say, feigning a sophisticated world-weariness. “I hate those County types.”

John lurches to a halt at a red light. The car behind squeals its tyres against the tarmac.

“Watch the bloody road,” says Tina.

“I’ve been blind since birth,” he says in a quavery, starving match girl voice. “Spare us a copper, missus.”

Tina says nothing.

“Get Francescsa to show you around her house” says John, carrying on as if nothing has happened. “It’s haunted, you know.”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” I say, before my interest gets the better of me.

“What ghost?”

“A strangled schoolgirl,” snaps Tina, turning the cassette player on. I recognise one of her songs. *Thin Air*. She hums along ... *and I’m not the girl you thought I was, oh, no (woah, woah) ...*

“Have you got your swimming things, Patch?” yells John over the guitar solo. “The pool’s fired up -”

Actually, I love swimming, but for some reason the thought of stripping off, even to a one-piece, in front of John is unthinkable. “Swimming’s crap,” I say grumpily.

“And Goths don’t sunbathe,” he grins. “Maybe we should buy you an inflatable coffin – with paddles.” He’s taking the piss. I feel myself blushing underneath my white make-up.

Almost as soon as we reach the motorway, Tina says she needs the loo.

“Tina,” sighs John. He doesn’t look at her.

She exhales. “I need a piss. Is that alright with you?”

“Whatever,” says John. No joke this time.

I stare out of the window and pretend not to listen.

Tina swivels around in her seat. Her nose is all red and sore. “Can you believe it, Patch? He won’t even let me use the fucking toilet, now.”

“It’s my revolutionary new form of potty-training,” says an officious Dr Fairfax to me. I can tell he’s pissed off with Tina but he’s trying to lighten the vibe. He veers across the motorway lanes and onto the slip-road. Someone behind hoots their horn. “Land ahoy,” yells John.

Tina fumbles with her seatbelt. “Just park, will you?”

She is ages, but when she comes back, she looks better. Tina takes her sunglasses off, and rests her bare, dirty feet on the dashboard. Her painted toenails are lined up like big, rich

cherries. Now she can't stop talking. She tells me about the new album she is recording, how Phil has got her a gig at a local festival later that week, some promo do in Monaco...

"We're all going," she says. "Phil's got you a backstage pass."

"Monaco. Fuck" I say. "Magic."

John has gone strangely quiet. He just squints at the road ahead.

As we pass *Boddle Head* Nature Reserve, Tina bangs her fists on the dashboard. "- Stop, stop" she says.

John screeches the car into a lay-by behind an ice-cream van. He still doesn't say anything.

Tina leaps out of the car and comes back with three ice-creams, decorated with flakes, syrups and nuts. Her famous, half-child, half-woman's face flashes me a smile as she passes a cone through the open window. "I couldn't decide what to have," she says. "So I asked for everything." She produces a sugar-shaker full of hundreds-and-thousands. "Nicked this – for the journey." She and I spend the rest of the trip scattering them all over each other.

It only took me ten minutes to get to *Fallowfield*. I cycled up the long drive, leaned my bike against the shed, then went round to the front door and knocked. After a little while, the iron-studded door creaked open. Francesca stood against the light. I'd prepared a speech, but in the end I didn't need to say anything. She flung her arms around my neck. I felt the warmth of her shoulders (God, she was skinny), smelled her extortionate perfume and too-sweet breath. When we had released each other, a bullet of white fur and black spots nearly winded me.

"Find squeaky bear!" Francesca commanded. Emil, the irrepressible and brainless Dalmatian dashed back inside. "Patch" she almost sobbed. "Thank you. Oh, thank you."

After I'd taken off my coat and dumped my rucksack, I went down to the kitchen where Francesca was ladling pasta onto my plate. Chanterelles. Garlic. Herbs. She untied her pinny, lit a candle and poured wine into a chipped but genuine Georgian glass. She frowned, smoothed a fine strand of light-brown hair away from her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. "I wish you'd let me make it look a little less faecal. A few smoked oysters would make all the difference."

I didn't want to get heavy about anything that evening. Given the circumstances, my vegetarianism felt faddish. "Smells delicious" I enthused.

"I hope it's edible." Francesca's false modesty. Her cooking was famous. She raised

her glass. "Good health."

"And yours" I reciprocated, and immediately realised my *faux pas*. "Cheers" I added, after a split-second pause. Francesca didn't seem to notice.

"And now I want a blow-by-blow on Dominic" she said, once we sat down. "Any news on the job-front?"

I shook my head. "Dominic isn't really the nine-to-five type," I said.

"Well, what about the record deal?" Francesca beamed in anticipation.

Six months ago, an A&R guy from an Indie label had shown some interest in Dominic's work. "Blown a bit cold," I said.

"Too bad; these things happen. Are you terribly strapped?"

"We're managing."

"You won't suffer in silence, will you?"

"Of course not" I lied. "Thanks."

Francesca paused. "And your mother?"

I hadn't seen Agi since last December when she'd flown back for my father's funeral. I'd been impressed by how genuinely she'd comforted Eileen, my father's third wife. Agi had cried most of the way back to London. Astonishing, really: my father had ditched her. At the time of their divorce she had called him some terrible things. People never ceased to amaze me. Agi reminisced. How handsome he had been when younger. Cultured, eloquent, gifted ... I was relieved when she dried her tears, smiled and called herself a foolish woman. I told Francesca how, at the funeral, I had been baffled by three mysterious women in mourning. Eileen had barely contained her resentment at their arrival. Agi had had to divert her in order to prevent a scene. The other guests pretended not to notice.

"So he was still at it, the old Casanova." Francesca's grey eyes twinkled as she laughed.

My father had always been an incorrigible womaniser. His first wife, Tina's mother, had committed suicide when Tina was eleven – unable, Agi had told me, to stand his infidelity any longer. A year later, my father had met Agi on a sabbatical in Budapest – she'd worked in the university library where my father was doing research. When Agi fell pregnant my father had brought her to England. They were married one December afternoon, five months after I was born, in a grey London registry office. In their wedding pictures they look grimly purposeful, more dressed for a business meeting than a wedding. My father must have been relieved, initially, to find someone to take care of Tina but Tina and Agi never hit

it off. Tina, a highly-strung and insecure child, resented Agi's attempts at taking her mother's place. They fought bitterly. Eventually, my father sent Tina away to boarding school – something she never forgave him for. She spent the holidays defiant and rebellious, running rings around Agi, mocking her appalling English, inciting me to riot. Blissfully unaware of the emotional undercurrents, I basked in my sister's attention and followed her around with puppyish devotion. At that age, I had none of Tina's spikiness. *A polite, affectionate child who is, perhaps, a little easily-led*, ran my first infant school report.

"More wine?" said Francesca, topping up my glass without waiting for an answer.

I noticed and admired a new etching above the worktop - a semi-abstract conglomeration of purples and oranges. Later, while drying up, I was to notice its title: *Immortality*.

"Scrounged from the artist" Francesca said. "Local lad. Just had his first exhibition. Wonderful reviews."

"Brilliant" I mumbled, my mouth full of food.

Francesca talked about the artist, his boyfriend problems, his ongoing feud with his parents. I smiled. Francesca kept up with her friends' fortunes as intently as other people followed soaps.

"How's college?"

"Don't ask."

She tutted. "Why not leave?" She waved her hand.

I pulled a face. "It's not that simple."

"How about the piano lessons?"

"Five pupils."

"Five?"

"Yes, five" I said a little more firmly than I had meant to.

"Patch" said Francesca, taking my hands in hers. "I'll ask you again; are you *managing*?"

"Francesca, please, everything's fine," I said, not quite meeting her gaze. She could be insistent when pressuring help on people and I didn't have the energy for an argument. There was silence as Francesca eyed me sceptically, and then her eyelid started twitching. For the first time, I noticed that one side of her face seemed to be drooping slightly. It was a shock. I'd almost forgotten her illness. I couldn't think of anything to say. I gazed around the enormous kitchen. The terracotta floor. Emil's bed next to the open cupboard (golfing

umbrellas, ancient croquet set, odd wellingtons), the leaded windows with iron latches, the mountain of washing-up in the sink.

“Does Mrs Potts still clean for you?” I asked, at last.

Francesca shook her head and took another sip of wine. “Crumbling vertebrae. Poor girl’s nearly seventy.”

Francesca was only in her late fifties. I thought of the student food parcels she used to send me, the impeccable French restaurant where she’d taken me once for my birthday, the innumerable times over the years that I’d been too busy to return her calls or respond to her carefully penned letters. I suddenly realised how much I’d relied on her just being there, in the background, and how much I was going to miss her. There was silence. A radiator gurgled. Emil twitched in his sleep. The clock was tapping away the minutes.

“Well, Patch” said Francesca, eventually, “what shall we do with the rest of the evening?” She poured herself a small brandy, me a large one and we went through to the sitting room where the fire dogs in the inglenook were bowing under a pile of logs. Somehow, Emil skidded past us, backwards, his claws clattering on the polished stone floor and crash-landed in his favourite spot in front of Francesca’s chair. She reached down and fondled his ears. I picked up the matches from the grate. Soon, flames were curling around the logs.

“Actually” said Francesca, “Mrs Potts’s daughter, Dawn cleans for me now. Do you remember her?”

Tina had been pleased, that week, to find me “a little playmate.” I knew she called Dawn that in earshot of John to irritate me. It worked. Dawn was half a head taller, a year older and twice as skinny as I was. Dawn and I had fallen out towards the end of my stay – the usual story – we’d both fancied the same bloke.

“Dawn Potts” I exclaimed. “How is she? What’s she doing now?”

Resin from a log bled and hissed in the flames.

“Married.”

“God. Makes me feel ancient,” I said.

“More brandy? Of course you will.” She must have noticed me fumbling in my bag and then checking myself. Raising her eyes heavenward: “it’s alright. Puff away if you must.”

The brandy was making me drowsy. My cheeks were burning with heat and drink. I remembered how cold it had been in the railway station.

“Tina’s birthday on Sunday” I said. “Halloween.” A burning log crackled like a pistol shot. I rested my cigarette on the brick hearth and rescued a wood louse from the blazing grate.

Francesca looked surprised I’d mentioned her. I didn’t, usually. I took another sip of brandy. “I thought I saw her, today. Next to the ticket office. Stupid, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not stupid.” Francesca gazed into the fire. “Ten years in January since Freddie died, and I still hear him coughing in the next room or pottering about in the garden.”

Freddie, Francesca’s husband, had been an eminent diplomat when he’d been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Francesca had nursed him unstintingly until his death in 1990.

She smiled. “Oh, he was hard work, towards the end. He hated being ill. Developed a shocking bad-temper. I wish you could have known him when he was younger. A brilliant man. Quite, quite brilliant.”

Emil whined and twitched in his sleep. Next to him, on the carpet, lay the tooth-marked, headless corpse of Squeaky Bear.

“Who lives at *Woodside* now?”

“Oh – John’s back.” Francesca smiled maternally and picked up her brandy. Her hands trembled slightly.

I couldn’t help feeling somewhat resentful of the pride in her voice. Francesca was usually a shrewd judge of character but she had one blind spot: John Fairfax. Her devotion to him still irked me, though I understood how easy it was to be taken in by his charm. As a child I’d thought the world of him and trusted him utterly, conferring on him the status of favourite uncle or older brother. Though I adored my sister, it was John I’d turn to with a problem, John I’d call if I wanted cheering up. During the summer that my father walked out on me and Agi, he’d often pick me up from school, taking me for burgers, milkshakes, walks along the Thames, listening as I’d poured my heart out to him. All that changed after Tina’s disappearance. In those few weeks, as hope had dwindled with each news bulletin, I tried repeatedly to contact him, desperate to hear his voice, but he never returned my calls. Finally, I gave up. I couldn’t even work out if it was personal, or just the accumulation of intolerable circumstances. Whatever the truth, losing him hurt almost as much as losing Tina. He’d let me down badly. I still couldn’t quite forgive him for that.

“I thought John had rented *Woodside* out,” I said.

“The tenants have gone,” Francesca said. “Bought a place in Stoke, I believe. He’s

redecorating at the moment. Practically gutted the place. He'll be moving back in once it's finished."

I wondered if that meant he'd be coming over to *Fallowfield*. I hoped I'd be able to avoid him. I felt distinctly uncomfortable at the prospect of having to exchange pleasantries with him.

There was a rushing sound from the chimney. A small avalanche of soot heralded first one, then another dark shape that fluttered eerily from the inglenook and danced about the wall lights. Wings fluttered around the bulbs, casting momentary shadows on the ceiling. Two peacock butterflies, woken from hibernation by the smoke of the fire. One of them alighted opening and closing its ragged wings.

"Aren't they beautiful" I said, but when I turned to look at Francesca, she was asleep, her face mysterious, photograph smooth and remote.

Chapter Three

The next morning, I sipped my coffee and scanned the newspapers. Plane crash over the Pacific. Attempts to retrieve the flight-recorder box had been halted by bad weather. A Nazi war criminal was to evade extradition from Chile. The photograph of the accused revealed a dapper, elderly gentleman in a Panama hat. *Mayer-Ewart* – nicknamed *Papa Death*. I turned to the television page. Soaps. Game shows. *Lifelong Bonanza*. A wildlife programme – *Nature's Hunters*. The colour-supplement yielded an article, describing a pre-historic man's final hours, high up in the snowy Alps. His body had been discovered by climbers earlier that year. According to archaeologists, he had been driven from his settlement on account of some misdemeanour. There were X-ray plates. A state-of-the-art computer had reconstructed the face. The result was unremarkable - someone you'd pass in the street without a second glance. From the contents of his stomach, scientists were able to identify his last meal. I thought of Tina.

I turned to the local rag. *Gin-traps found in Redwater Woods*. The article was accompanied by a grisly picture. *Young Fawn's Agonising Struggle To Escape Death*. I hoped the photographer had put it out of its misery.

I laid the paper back down on the table, and became aware that someone was moving around across the hall. The radio was on quietly. There was the grind of castors against the wooden floors, and the clink of small objects being dusted. I'd always divided people into two types – those who dragged furniture aside to clean underneath, and those who didn't. Personally, I'd always favoured the out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach. While thoroughness was, I supposed, a worthy asset, I have never to this day been able to distinguish between thoroughness and pedantry. Someone across the hall was being thorough. I heard a tiny object tinkle to the floor, followed by an indecipherable expletive, and smiled. Then I remembered Francesca saying that Dawn Potts cleaned for her. I stood up and followed the sound of the radio.

Francesca's house was a huge, Edwardian, mock-Tudor affair, built in 1910 by a wealthy manufacturer. No expense had been spared. There were turrets, genuine Jacobean panelling in the hall, bought for, what was then, a small fortune from an impoverished aristocrat. Seven bedrooms. A library and music room. Now, most of the house was unused and much of the furniture covered with dustsheets. I'd once asked Francesca if she hadn't

thought of selling up and buying somewhere more manageable. She'd pretended not to hear me. For all her moaning about the place (cold, damp, impossible to keep clean) she loved it.

In the central hall, an oak staircase, richly lit by a stained glass picture window, swept down from the gallery (Francesca had always liked making an entrance). The steps were worn and polished. After a few glasses of wine, they could be treacherous. The place, in its heyday, must have been bustling with children, starched-apronned domestics, weekend guests. Now, the house seemed uncomfortable in its own silence. If you sat still for too long, you got a ringing in your ears, and thoughts seemed to generate their own echoes.

I paused at the door of Freddie's study, taking in the framed Chinese calligraphy, the porcelain, the collection of wooden idols (Freddie, before his illness had travelled extensively in the Far East). The air smelled of camphor, incense and furniture polish. The vacuum-cleaner made a strange, tortured whine, and then was silent.

"Oh, sugar!" came a breathless mutter. A bulky posterior thumped against a life-sized Buddha.

I walked forward. "Dawn?"

When she stood up, her face was pink and shiny. "Patch?"

I wouldn't have recognised her. Where clothes once used to hang limply over hip-bones and shoulder-blades, they now stretched and rucked. Before, she had been sensitive about her fine mousy hair, pampering it with volumising mousses and sprays. Now she wore it in a shapeless bob, fringed and functional. She looked as if she belonged to a different generation.

Dawn walked over, enveloped my short, stocky frame in a bear-like crush and then released and studied my face: my wide, lopsided mouth, slavic cheekbones I'd inherited from Agi, and the arched eyebrows that lent me a bemused but benign expression. "You haven't changed a bit."

I stood, grinning for a moment before realising I ought to say something. "Aren't you looking well?" My tact sounded a little wooden.

Dawn giggled. "Well, I expect there's a bit more of me these days." She tutted like a children's television presenter. "You'd think I'd burn it off, what with all this housework. Sluggish metabolism. No use trying to fight it." She fiddled inside her T-shirt and hoiked up her bra. "Anyway, it's what's on the inside that counts, isn't it?"

I ran my fingers over an exquisite statuette. Every muscle was perfectly proportioned. It smiled cruelly.

"Gives me the creeps," said Dawn.

"They're Taoist Gods." I sounded as though I meant to shame her ignorance and struggled unsuccessfully for something more to say.

"I'm scared to dust them," she said. "Probably worth a fortune." Dawn stooped to unsnag the Hoover-flex.

I stared at her, trying to reconcile the bullish teenager I had known with the pale woman, smiling up at me.

"Down for long?" Dawn asked.

"Couple of days." I pulled a face. "Work on Monday."

Dawn picked up a porcelain bowl and ran a duster over it. "Poor Mrs Dashwood." She sighed. "Tragic, isn't it?" Dawn replaced the bowl heavily on the windowsill. It made a bright ringing sound ("Whoops, clumsy!"). "I'm here most days." She smiled and lowered her voice. "Like to keep an eye on her."

I was relieved. Francesca living entirely unattended had worried me.

"You live in London now, don't you? With your boyfriend." She said the word a little conspiratorially. "Is he nice?"

For the first time, Dawn was silent. She obviously expected an answer.

"Yeah, he's ... nice." I sounded pathetic and my vanity niggled. I hoped she wouldn't think I was shackled up with some twat. "He's a musician," I added.

"That's nice. I had such a laugh that time you stayed here. It was silly to lose touch like that. Men! I ask you. They're never worth it! What was his name? Kevin something."

"Stringer."

"Kevin Stringer." She paused for a moment as if she was tasting something she hadn't eaten for a while. "That's right. Kevin Stringer."

She picked up a duster and ran it over a frame. Mounted inside was an iridescent butterfly the size of a paperback. I remembered Francesca once telling me that in Japan, butterflies were a symbol of infidelity because of the way they fluttered from flower to flower.

"I felt really sorry afterwards, for speaking to you the way I did. You looked so upset, that night at the fairground. I followed you and Kev, but I lost you in the woods. Had to run all the way home. Wouldn't half have copped it from my Mum if she'd known I'd been out." She laughed. "She'd grounded me after I'd got drunk at the *The Signalmans' Retreat* with you. Teenagers, eh?"

I remembered the night Dawn referred to. Feeling wretched after witnessing that awful, final argument between Tina and John, I'd sought out Kevin Stringer. I'd got very drunk. Stoned. Spent the night with him and – well – it had all been pretty awful.

"We had brilliant fun at the fairground, didn't we?" Dawn beamed. "Do you remember the ghost train?"

I nodded.

"And all those free rides on the *Barracuda*." She peered out from under her fringe. "My top came undone. I was so embarrassed." She giggled.

I joined in. "And those raffle tickets you bought from that sad bastard Neville Cotton. You won an instamatic camera. I was so jealous."

She looked down at the Hoover.

"You remember Neville Cotton? Mr H Dandruff? H for halitosis?" I persevered. Neville Cotton was the gangly evangelist who, fifteen years earlier, had hung around the local youth club, distributing leaflets and inviting kids to Sunday-school outings. He was a laughing-stock.

Dawn's smile frayed. At last she said, "Neville and me – er – we're married.

I was taken aback for a moment, and then I grinned. "Pull the other one!" It was only then that I noticed. Her generous, low-slung bosoms bouncing under a T-Shirt which declared *Jesus Loves Me*. The "O" in *Loves* was heart-shaped.

I looked up. "Oh, shit. Sorry."

"Three years next March."

Silence. Then again, "sorry, Dawn. I didn't realise."

"It's alright," Dawn sounded a little defensive when she said "he's changed a lot, you know, since you met him."

"I'm sure he's really nice," I said. I was relieved when she smiled.

"Fancy a cup of tea?"

We sat in the conservatory.

"So. Neville Cotton. Tell me everything."

Dawn was silent for a moment. "After you left Redwater, I went a bit – well - doolally." She gripped my square, olive hands in her white puffy ones. "I was looking for something, Patch, only I didn't know what." I watched her shapeless bosom heaving under *Jesus Loves Me*. The dull panic, when a stranger begins unburdening on a train or in a café, began to overpower me. "I was lost; and then I found Neville, Jesus be praised." Oh God; we'd

barely sipped our coffee. There promised to be a good twenty minutes more of this. She was in her stride. "Neville is so at one with the Lord." She smiled beatifically. I'd burned my mouth badly – the coffee was still scalding. "Then I was baptised. Oh, Patch; it was so... so... oh, I don't know." She was blushing and becoming inarticulate. "You've no idea what letting Jesus into your life can do for you. Oh, there I go, getting all evangelical. Still, you can't help it when you're full of the spirit."

The situation was getting creepy. "That's great," I nodded politely. "Sounds like you've found what you're looking for."

"Oh, I have" she said enthusiastically. "Completely. What are you up to these days?"

I thought of cycle rides through traffic fumes. Bored students. Management directives. I thought of Dominic, sitting with his headphones on, his computer whirring, while the dinner I'd cooked steamed and cooled gently on the table. "Me? Piano lessons, and part-time lecturing. Music."

Dawn picked up her teacup and sipped. "Aren't you a clever-clogs? I know I should have worked harder at school. Always wanted to make something of myself. Never mind, eh?" She was silent for a moment as she gazed out of the window at the birds on the bird table. Her eyes seemed a little watery.

"Dawn," I hesitated. "Is everything okay?"

"Whatever do you mean?" She didn't meet my gaze, but drained the last of her tea. "Oh well. Best get on." She muttered something about the devil and idle hands, before beginning to hum tunelessly. *Jesus loves me, this I know, Because the bible tells me so ...*

I heard Dawn turn the vacuum cleaner on in my bedroom upstairs. The ceiling seemed to vibrate. Minute particles orbited in the yellow sunlight, which streamed through the leaded windows. I thought of them settling on picture frames, window-ledges, sinking to rest between the floorboards. I sneezed. Dust, I remembered reading somewhere, was a mixture of dead skin and the microscopic mites that gorged themselves on it. I imagined dermiverous, sci-fi beetles, working their mandibles through human husk. As the vacuum cleaner whined, I wondered if there were any uneaten flakes of the teenage me here at *Fallowfield*, or even a fragment of my sister. Was there something of her still in the air? Was I, I wondered, breathing in Tina?

Emil had gnawed a great hole in the hearthrug. That afternoon, he brought up a large quantity of red wool on the kitchen floor. The effect on first glance was terrifying. It looked like he'd haemorrhaged. "It's not his fault, poor darling," Francesca said, fondling Emil's spotty ears. "He hasn't been out for days." She mentioned that she'd found a local set-up that walked dogs and watered plants while people were away on holiday. "Only eight pounds an hour." I told Francesca to call them off immediately – I'd take Emil out as and when. Francesca looked relieved in a way I hadn't seen before. Her smile made me swallow. "Thank you, Patch," she said. "Thank you so much, darling." Later, when we ran out of milk, I immediately volunteered to cycle to the local shop, and take Emil along. I suddenly realised that, in an immediate and practical way, I could actually make a difference to Francesca.

Emil was beside himself with excitement when I clipped on his lead. He snapped at the wind and gamboled about the garden like a puppy. He threw me a flirtatious, doe-eyed grin and I blew him a kiss. I needed to tire him out somehow, so I slipped the loop of his lead over my handlebars, climbed onto my bike and let him pull me around the turning circle. In two minutes he was off down the drive, dragging me after him, oblivious of the puddles. He raced ahead, his tongue lolling out of his mouth making little ecstatic yelps. We gathered momentum and I had to swerve to avoid potholes and skidded on the mud. I could hardly breathe, I was laughing so much. As we reached the main road, Emil veered off suddenly to the left. Instinctively I gripped the brake-levers, but Emil, in full flight, didn't stop. My bike tipped crazily into the muddy verge and sent me sprawling painfully. There was the harsh grinding of tyres on gravel, a hollow smash and the tinkle of shattered glass. The lead jerked. Emil shrieked sickeningly and then started shivering.

"Oh my God. Emil?"

A car door slammed. "Shit," someone roared. "You stupid fucking prat."

Emil was lying in the mud. He'd somehow half-slipped his collar and his face looked strange and contorted.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" yelled the driver of the car.

I began panicking – stroking Emil and kissing his muddy forehead. I fidgeted with the buckle on his collar, trying to free him from the tight leather choker. "Are you alright, Emil? Please, dear God, let him be alright." What would I tell Francesca? This was all she needed

"Look at my car," the driver yelled. I was too shaken to reply. "What are you going to do about my car?" He slammed his fist on the roof in a way that scared me slightly. I

couldn't remember ever having seen anyone so angry.

I began crying. "I don't give a shit about your car. What about my dog?" At that moment, Emil wagged his tail.

"He's fine" the driver snapped. "It's my car you should be worried about. Look at it. Fucking look at it!"

Emil licked my nose, stood up and shook himself. "Oh, thank God!" I wailed, cuddling his filthy body. "Thank God." He rolled over to give me complete access to his tummy.

The red, shiny coupé had smashed into one of the trees that lined the drive. This definitely was not a quick respray. The nose was crumpled and one of the headlamps was smashed. It was only when his fury subsided slightly that I recognised the driver, and froze.

Oh my God. Tina's old boyfriend, John Fairfax.

I had a crazy idea of pedaling back to the railway station and going home before he recognised me. This was a fucking disaster. "Sorry," I mumbled, keeping my eyes downcast.

"I should bloody well think so." John started muttering something about a no-claims bonus. He kicked the wheel arch and snarled "fuck" again.

I stood up. My legs were shaking. I noticed Francesca pottering down the drive. "What on earth's going on? Oh, John. Your poor car."

"It was her bloody fault," he yelled. "If I hadn't swerved I'd have hit her and the dog. It's not even my car."

"Sorry" was all I could think of to say for about the fifth time.

"Not half as sorry as I am," snapped John.

"Is anybody hurt? Patch darling, you're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

Silence. Then John clutched his forehead and groaned. "Patch?"

"Well, everyone's alright," breezed Francesca, "that's the main thing. Come on, John, it's not the end of the world."

Though John mellowed slightly on Francesca's arrival, I had found his initial fury genuinely disturbing. I'd thought, at one point, that he may have meant to hit me.

Evening. Francesca and I were in the sitting room after dinner. I still felt shaken after that morning. It was only when I inspected how badly fucked my bike was that I realised what a

near-miss I'd had.

"Patch? Pass me the clicker, please."

I stood up, wrestled the chewed remote control from between Emil's paws and handed it to Francesca. The volume button had received a fatal puncture wound and was stuck on permanent full-blast. "What's on?"

Francesca pressed the remote control and a sort of jazzed-up madrigal started playing deafeningly. *Shakespeare in Perspective*. She knocked back a couple of pills and washed them down with water.

"Oh, God, Francesca. Must we?"

"John's in it," she said, proudly. I must say, I'd had enough of John Fairfax for one day. Francesca clearly hadn't.

John had grown up on the wrong side of Redwater. In his teens he gained a reputation as a petty criminal, joy rider and someone quick with his fists. Soon after his release from *Grangeside Young Offenders*, a policeman had frog-marched him up to Francesca's front door. She had guffawed as the policeman elaborated on his having caught him red-handed trying to steal one of her stone lions.

"Quite ludicrous" she told me as she recounted the story. "They're over two tons each. People have always had it in for that poor boy."

Instead of pressing charges, Francesca had invited him in for lunch, and had come to an agreement – she would pay him to garden for her. In those days Francesca had been something of a village socialite and had soon networked John's horticultural flair about the local hoi polloi. With her help, he had found plenty of work. She had carefully targeted fading matrons, who enjoyed watching a young man stripped to the waist, tidying their borders. Later the same year, when his father threw him out, Francesca and Freddie had offered John a room at *Fallowfield*. "... after all," she said "he was almost part of the family by then."

John had not shone conventionally at school, but demonstrated a talent for acting. He had a facility for impressions and could hold entire conversations switching chameleon-like from one voice to another as lent colour to what he was saying. Francesca had often told me how he had charmed his way out of all sorts of tight corners like this. His Drama-teacher organised a one-man evening of monologues for him - a trendy mix of anything from Webster to contemporary pop-lyrics. Francesca had been mesmerised and grew adamant that he should pursue his talent. She'd bullied John into evening classes, driving him to and fro in

her beige runaround. The following year, she had accompanied him time and again to London for his drama school auditions, waiting patiently in snack-bars and refectories for entire afternoons. “He passed them all with flying colours of course” she gloated to herself. “Spoilt for choice.”

John had been out of drama school for only a year when he had met Tina. At that time, he was a promising young actor who had notched up a few decent credits. His success, however, was short-lived. As Tina’s career soared meteorically, offers of work for John became more and more sporadic. Soon he was generally perceived as just another of those actors who looked good, showed potential and in the final reckoning did not have what it took to make it. After Tina’s disappearance, the painfully slow trickle of work dried up for John completely. He scraped a living once again as an odd-jobbing gardener. Five years on, Francesca finally persuaded him to have another go. She introduced him to an agent friend of hers, who took him on and put him forward for a few roles. Francesca’s faith in John paid off. Almost immediately, he landed a part in a critically-acclaimed television drama, *Urban Miracle*. The subsequent casting, by an up-and-coming director, of John as Petruchio, in a trendy open-air production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, secured his reputation. Before long, John was turning down work left, right, and centre, and had theatres fighting over him:

1991:

Jake – *Simply Heaven* (Pimlico Films)

Richie – *When Winter Comes* (ITV Playhouse)

Vasques – *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre)

Ross – *In the Still of the Night* (First Sight Productions for Channel Four)

and so it had gone on. Nowadays, his name appeared regularly on theatre flyers and television credits.

“Do you want anything?” I yelled over the electronic-madrigal (*fol-de-rol* and a *nonny-nonny-no*), tucking a rug over her knees.

“No thank you, darling. Hurry up; it’s starting.”

The play was set in a government building. Lots of chrome and glass. The madrigal had cross-faded into a tunelessly thumpy cyber-score, rendered almost unbearable by the blaring volume. Francesca didn’t seem to mind.

“Patch,” she called excitedly, “there he is.”

John was dressed in a hybridised military uniform – an arty punning of camo-jacket and Elizabethan doublet-and-hose. I already knew I was going to hate this. John carried off the

slightly ludicrous costume better than most of the other characters. I noted to myself the obvious good looks my sister fell for all those years ago: narrow blue eyes, thick, powerful build, swarthy skin (Tina had once confided in me that his grandmother was rumoured to have had an affair with a West Indian sailor). Now there were streaks of silver in his dark hair and tiny creases around his eyes but, were it not for his broken nose, lumpy and flattened like a boxer's against his face, he would still have looked perfectly at home modelling Arran sweaters on the front of a countrywear catalogue.

"Bit old for it, isn't he?" I said, turning back to my magazine.

Francesca sprang to his defence. "Darling, Leontes ends up sixteen years older by the end. You can't have it both ways."

I leafed pages noisily.

*... Three crabbed months had sour'd themselves to death
Ere I could make thee open thy white hand,
And clap thyself my love: then didst thou utter,
'I am yours forever'...*

The slightest trace of West Country accent gave his performance a voguish swarthinness. John had, I thought cynically, done a pretty good job of reinventing himself after his dodgy start in life.

"Clever boy," mused Francesca.

"Tea?" I said, getting up and deliberately standing in front of the screen.

Francesca looked irritated. "Thank you." She shifted in her seat. "Darling, you're in the way."

I walked through to the kitchen and washed up the supper things while the kettle boiled.

Francesca said nothing as, half an hour later, I set the tray down on the table next to her. Her eyes were still glued to the screen. John's outfit had changed – a sort of bullet-proof-vest-cum-smoking-jacket. "Are you actually enjoying this?" I asked. "*Garden-Cavalcade* on the other side."

*... Go on, go on:
Thou canst not speak too much; I have deserv'd
All tongues to talk their bitterest...*

"My God, he's just so deeply talented," said Francesca fervently.

For fuck's sake. I walked into the hall, irritated by her doting sighs and gasps and picked up the phone.

“You have reached the answerphone of (*click*)” and then a sleepy, grumpy voice.
“Hello?”

“Dom, it’s me. Sorry – were you in bed?”

“No.” Silence. “Hi.”

“How’s things?” I asked. Yelling over the television had left me sounding slightly hysterical. I cleared my throat noisily.

“Fine.” Dominic seemed baffled and a bit concerned. “Are you okay?”

“I tried calling you last night,” I said. This time my voice came out husky. “I tried calling -” I repeated.

“I was out.” Dominic went on, before I had a chance to finish the same sentence for a second time. I screwed up my eyes in an effort to remember his vague smile; and failed. All I could get was a weirdly homogenized blur of light-brown curls and the movement of hands on a silent keyboard.

From the living room came a deafening volley of machine-gun fire and a few dramatic chords. I suspected Francesca had secretly changed channels.

“Lovely.” Now I sounded like a parodied secretary. “Are you alright? You sound bunged up.”

“Got a throat” Dominic rasped.

“Oh, mate” I said, trying to sound chummy, this time with some success. “There’s some stuff in the cupboard.”

“Which one?”

“Above the sink.”

“I hate blackberry flavour.”

“Blackcurrant.” I corrected.

“What?”

Again, we had run aground. “So, tell me about last night” I persevered.

“Did a couple of sets down *The Bull*.”

“And you’ve got another gig this evening.”

“Yeah. I was just practising.”

“Oh. Did I disturb you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dominic said, meaning me to feel guilty. I didn’t.

From the sitting room came the sound of Francesca laughing and clapping. “Oh well done, John. Bravo! Bravo!” There was more machine-gun fire. Francesca gave a little

shriek. I wondered if, in some bizarre, directorial coup, Hermione and her daughter had mown down the rest of the cast.

“Well, I won’t keep you” I chirped brightly.

Dominic didn’t answer. Silence again, and then, nervously, “Emma? Do you think Patrick’s listened to the CD yet?”

“I’m not sure” I lied.

“It’s been three weeks now.”

Patrick had returned the CD to me a fortnight ago with a terse dismissal, which still languished at the bottom of my bag, creased and sticky with escaped Travel Sweets. Dominic was on tenterhooks. Deals always seemed to be in the bag for him - and then they weren’t. So many near-misses, so many *Sorry-this-isn’t-quite-what-we’re-looking-for*s. There was *Papillon Records*, who had been in the middle of a merger when they signed Dom’s band and the album got lost in a conflict of schedules. There was *Nine Records*, whose A&R guy moved to another label halfway through negotiations. Patrick Ghizla was my suggestion. His sister had been at school with me and we had remained in Christmas-card-contact. Reluctant to grasp the nettle, I was waiting for the right moment to break the bad news.

“I’ll try his office” I bluffed, I thought entirely unconvincingly.

Dominic seemed reassured. “Yeah. Bye Em. Oh, and say hi to Francesca for me.

I hung up and poked my head around the sitting room door. *Shakespeare in Perspective* seemed interminable. An anaemic-looking man in a black turtle-neck was wanking on about lost innocence.

“Fabulous production,” said Francesca. “Such insight.”

“Well, if you like that sort of thing.”

“Don’t be such a sourpuss.”

“He nearly killed me.”

“Darling, you did make a frightful mess of his car.”

“I didn’t,” I said indignantly, “*he* did. And he was bloody rude.”

“Not without some justification,” said Francesca, dryly.

“Francesca, he completely lost it. I thought he was going to hit me.”

“Nonsense. John can get in a frightful stew but it’s all wind and water, really.” I could see I wasn’t going to win this one.

Just then, the screen went blank. *Act V.*

“Oh God. You mean there’s more?”

“Come on, Patch. It’s terribly clever. They’ve set it in a totalitarian state – you see Leontes and Polixenes are really two sides of the same coin ...”

“I think I’ve missed too much to pick it up by now” I interrupted firmly.

John had been artificially aged and his bullet-proof smoking-jacket was in tatters.

... whilst I remember

Her and her virtues, I cannot forget

My blemishes in them ...

I picked up the same magazine for the fifth time that evening and thumbed through it. *Wife-Swapping in The Home Counties. Win a luxury Weekend Break. Horoscopes. Mine said It’s time to review the balance in your life. Neglect your personal commitments at your peril. Tina’s ran This month brings contentment. Watch that busy social calendar and don’t overindulge.*

John was on again.

... So her dead likeness, I do well believe,

Excels whatever yet you look’d upon ...

I noticed Francesca, slumped back in her chair. I was to get used to these terrifying false-alarms over the forthcoming weeks. I turned off the television set and the silence was almost as deafening.

Francesca awoke as though she hadn’t been asleep. “I enjoyed that” she sighed.

“Darling, there are some *Marrons Glacé* in the sideboard. Why don’t you make us both some coffee to go with them?”

Chapter Four

On Sunday morning, I woke early – I always did on days when I didn't have work – and by eight o'clock I had bathed, washed up and tidied the kitchen. Francesca was still asleep so, when Emil whined at the back door, I opened it. On the log-pile, next to the shed, I sat down, lit a cigarette and watched the autumn sun rise over the woods. Emil barked and dropped a rotting tennis-ball, slimy with saliva, at my feet.

"Disgusting" I said, picking it up between thumb and finger, tossing it down the garden, then taking another drag. There was a bark. Too late, I turned to see a flash of black and white squeeze through the bars of the front gate. "Emil, you prat" I screamed, running after him. "Come here."

There was a screech of brakes. Oh fuck, not again. An ancient saloon was idling in the middle of the road. At least it wasn't John this time. An old bloke leaned out of the window. "Ever heard of a leash, laddie?" he roared.

"Did you hit him?" I panted.

"No I didn't. Bloody irresponsible." The driver eyed my short-back-and-sides and nose-ring suspiciously. "Lousy gyppos."

"Eh?"

"I've got the council onto you. Thieving bastards" he hissed.

"Oi, watch your tongue!" said a woman, standing in the front garden of the house opposite. She waved her secateurs at the road sign. "Thirty miles an hour. It's a built-up area, you know."

"Silly cow," said the bloke, pulling away.

"Thanks" I said to the woman. "Have you seen my dog?"

She eyed me a little curiously. I supposed I looked an unlikely visitor to *Fallowfield*. The woman snipped another insignificant twig from her rose bush. "Sorry love."

I ran back to *Fallowfield*, grabbed Emil's lead and trotted up the ancient track that led to *Woodside*. It was hard work. The path was steep, and the earth had been churned to red paste by the wet weather. It started to rain. Bloody fucking stupid dog.

Once in the woods, I clambered through brambles and crunchy bracken, whistling and calling Emil's name. I was filthy and soaked. After half an hour's vain search, I decided it was hopeless. I'd have to go back to *Fallowfield* and break the news to Francesca. Halfway down the track again, not far from *Grimes Pots* (and worryingly close to *Woodside*, Tina and

John's old house) I spied a flash of white fur. I set off over the barbed wire, catching my jeans and ripping them from mid-inside leg to crotch.

"Emil" I called, encouragingly. "Here, boy."

For a moment, his ears pricked up. Then he carried on sniffing in an *I'll-pretend-I-didn't-hear-that* sort of way.

I edged towards him, crouched, then rugby tackled. A wet Emil slithered out of my arms. Ten yards away from me he paused, barking and panting playfully. Fuming, I pulled myself up and brushed the wet leaves from my now-sodden jumper.

I heard a cracking of twigs. The air seemed to grow dark and a flock of crows in the trees above took to their wings. "Hello Patch." John scuffed the unruly hair at the back of his neck with his hand. Even after all this time, the gesture was familiar – something he used to do when he'd felt awkward or tired.

I swallowed. In the distance, I could just about make out the chimney pots of *Fallowfield*. "Excuse me, I'm in a hurry," I said, joylessly.

"Patch, I'm really sorry I lost it yesterday. I didn't mean to." He pulled back the fraying cuff of his jacket and scratched his wrist. His hands were flecked with green paint and there was dirt under his fingernails.

"I think the less said about it the better. Goodbye."

"I'm sorry I flew off the handle. If you'd given me half a chance afterwards, I'd have apologised."

I avoided his extraordinary blue eyes. "I don't want to talk about it. Emil," I yelled. "Bloody well come here." Rain was coursing down the back of my neck, seeping into my shoes. I shivered.

John eyed me curiously for a moment and then made a crackly white noise in the back of his throat. He held an imaginary intercom to his lips. "Sierra Charlie Foxtrot, come in. Stunning brunette found in Redwater Woods. Immediate backup required. I repeat -"

Even after fifteen years, I recognised the charm offensive immediately. What the fuck did he take me for? What had kept me sweet in my teens sure as hell wasn't going to work now. "Oh piss off," I said and turned to go.

Emil was cocking his leg against a tree. John squatted, put two fingers in his mouth and whistled softly. Emil bounded over, tongue lolling in a huge smile. "God, you stink," said John to Emil as he grabbed the collar. He took the lead from me, clipped it on and handed me the leather loop.

“Thanks, bye,” I said, snatching it and setting off. My nose was running. I wiped it on the back of my hand. I was sure I must have got mud on my face. I was too wet to care. There was a rumble of thunder in the distance, and the rain started lashing.

Two minutes later, his car drew up beside me. The smashed headlamp swung out of its socket on a piece of flex like an android’s eye.

“Come off it, Patch.”

“Get stuffed.”

He continued to drive alongside me. “Daphne darling. I know I’ve been a dashed cad,” he said, in his World-War I flying-ace voice.

I slithered in the mud and twisted my ankle. I was in real pain and sat down on the muddy bank. The car stopped next to me.

“Get in,” said John. I half-expected him to ask if I’d remembered my satchel.

We drove in silence. John made a few attempts at conversation which I answered with as much terseness as I could muster. When we arrived at *Fallowfield* he turned to me. “Tell Francesca I’ll collect her prescription tomorrow. And I’ll cut the logs next week.”

I grunted and climbed out of the car, noticing the obscene-looking rip in my jeans. My knickers showed slightly. I tugged my pullover down over my thighs.

“See you soon, Patch.”

Not if I could help it. I didn’t wait for the car to drive off. After shoving Emil’s spotty behind safely through the kitchen door, I leaned against the log pile and lit a cigarette. Cool, thin smoke caught the back of my throat. I breathed deeply.

PART TWO

Monday 17th June 1985

Arrived yesterday afternoon. John and were in a right strop with each other about something. There was a serious vibe in the car on the way down.

Tina's been banned from playing in Germany. This morning's paper said she'd put her microphone somewhere rude during the song, Auto-erotic. The article said it was another publicity stunt to boost flagging record sales. Tina saw me reading the paper and tried to grab it. When I asked if it was true, she told me not to believe everything I read. She looks terrible. Her nose is red again. She keeps sniffing. Her roots are showing. The newspapers always say awful things about her. Last year, there was an interview with her in a Sunday magazine all about how she thinks she's a reincarnation of Joan of Arc. Tina was really pissed off and spent hours on the phone to Phil, saying they made her sound like a complete headcase. She wanted Phil to sue them.

Tina says she's going to be busy this week and can't spend much time with me. I must have looked a bit disappointed because she said next time I decided to get expelled, could I give them a bit more warning. Then she told me that Mrs Potts's daughter, Dawn, would be coming over to 'play' with me (like how old am I?). I said, do I have to? and she said yes. John said Dawn was a nice girl. Yeah, right. Dawn's really skinny, with shitloads of freckles, and she's got this nerdy, yokel accent. At first I thought she was a bit mental and I asked him why she'd fixed me up with a fucking mongie. John said why didn't we go to my room and listen to some records? When we got upstairs, Dawn asked me if I liked Starburst and I said I'd rather eat my own vomit than listen to that dogshit. I think I freaked her out a bit. She kept chewing on her tongue. She asked me if I was a Goth and I said yes. I played her Foetusburger and she said she quite liked it. I'm not sure she meant it. She screamed when I took out my nose ring and showed her the hole. I told her I'd been expelled from school, and Dawn said she was off school at the moment, but she wouldn't say why. John caught us smoking behind the stables. He went really heavy and gave us a lecture about lung cancer. What a hypocrite – he smokes.

Dawn took me over to Francesca Dashwood's house where her Mum was cleaning and sat on this rock behind the hedge at Fallowfield. Dawn calls it her lookout point. You can see the whole garden from there. Dawn says she likes to know what everyone's up to. I

think she's a bit weird, spying on people like that. We chatted for ages. Dawn's gone all the way with a bloke from her school. Says you can't get pregnant the first time you do it.

This evening, John drove us to the fair. Dawn really likes John. She went all giggly and kept asking him to do funny voices.

At the fair, we saw a bunch of specky twats singing and bashing tambourines. This nerdomatic guy with dandruff said "hi guys" in an American accent and asked if we loved the Lord. I said if there was a God then he has a great fucking sense of humour. The bloke, whose name was Neville said it was an interesting point of view. I could tell he didn't like me saying fucking, so I said it again a few times. Dawn's such a sucker. She bought some of their wanky church raffle tickets.

The guy who runs the ghost train is really nice. He's called Kev Stringer. He's nineteen. Got a motorbike. I think Dawn fancies him. She started acting all brainless and girly and wouldn't let me get a word in. Kev says someone had a heart attack in The Ghost Train last year. Pathetic. It's shit. A few plastic skeletons. He gave us both a free ride on the Barracuda. It was fucking great. I nearly puked and Dawn's tits popped out.

Chapter Five

On Monday, when I arrived back, Dominic had a visitor: a tall, black girl in an orange boiler suit. “Em,” said Dominic. “Meet our new neighbour.”

“Nerissa,” said the girl. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” I dumped my rucksack on the sofa. “Neighbour?”

The girl nodded. “Next door.”

“The café?”

“Sandwich bar, now.” She smiled beautifully and extended a slender hand. Her nail varnish was glittery. I was suddenly aware of my rotting jacket and crumpled shirt. Her hand was perfectly smooth.

“Another coffee Nerissa?” Dominic was already filling the kettle.

“Nerissa,” I said, thoughtfully.

“I know,” she said. “My dad was a Shakespeare freak. Don’t tell me yours was into Jane Austen.”

She didn’t have to say any more. I already knew my name was redolent of dowdy spinsters in Empire-line dresses. “Such a *pretty* name” friends of Agi’s used to say, in a way that had made me fantasise about rotating my head 360 degrees and vomiting mushroom soup over them like that girl in *The Exorcist*. After Tina re-christened me Patch (as a child, I’d undergone treatment to correct a lazy eye) I’d refused to answer to anything else.

“So, how’s the renovation coming on?” I asked.

“Just about finished.” Nerissa grinned. “Sorry about all the noise. I’ve brought a peace offering.” She handed me a bottle of rum. “Mum came back from Jamaica last week.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

I studied Nerissa: generous, perfect mouth, delicate cheek-bones and a casual confidence, which gave her the air of someone utterly at ease with being beautiful. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-five.

“Saturday’s our grand opening. We’re having a party. I hope you guys can come.” Nerissa reached into her pocket and pulled out a card, which she handed to him: *Island in the Sun. The true flavour of the Caribbean*. The letters formed a grinning orange disc over a palm-tree wearing shades.

Dominic chuckled. “Nice.”

Outside, it had started to rain.

Francesca phoned me on Tuesday evening. She sounded a bit teary and told me how much she enjoyed my visit. I had been intending to go to a gig of Dominic's the following Saturday but found myself promising to go and see her instead.

I had a lousy week. I caught Dominic's cold. I left the college GNVQ register on the bus. Things were turning seriously heavy. On Wednesday, my Line Manager carpeted me in the glass booth.

I caught myself thinking about Tina in a way I hadn't done for years. The trip down to Redwater seemed to have churned up feelings that I thought I had long since laid to rest. On Tuesday night, when I couldn't sleep, I scabbled about in the cupboard under the stairs and eventually found the photo album I was looking for. The spine was broken and the cellophane that held the photos in place was loose and brittle. I sat on the sofa in the sitting room with my icy feet tucked up under my dressing gown and leafed through the cardboard pages: Tina as a toddler; Tina's first day at school, in her navy-blue tunic; Tina posing with her first band (in that photograph, her face is rounder and her hair is light brown - she hasn't discovered peroxide, yet); Tina as she was, twenty years ago, when she met John, posing, in a bikini, across some borrowed sports car. In those days, she'd had a chest. Then there were the later photographs: a sultry, early studio close-up of Tina amid wafts of smoke, expression borrowed from a silent movie star. Me in the garden of Tina and John's first flat in Burrough Road. I am broad-featured, long-plaited, perched on John's shoulders with my hands over his eyes, laughing hysterically. John, Tina and a glamorous Francesca in the loggia at *Fallowfield* when cancer was something that other people got. Tina singing with Steve Purley, at an outdoor event. Tina and manager, Philip Jacobs, accepting some industry award. Tina, sunbathing in a fashionable state of emaciation.

I paused over a rare family shot. Me, Tina and Agi, taken at my thirteenth birthday – two weeks after Dad had packed his bags and moved in with Eileen. Tina and I have our arms around one another. Agi is standing alone, smiling wistfully. She isn't quite in focus.

Dominic was snoring softly in the bedroom. The refrigerator hummed. I lit a cigarette. In the distance, a night train rattled.

Dad's left for good this time. I telephone my sister as evening approaches. Through the glass of the telephone kiosk, I watch a west-bound train pass through the cutting. It sounds its horn as it enters the tunnel. *Nee-nah*.

"Tina?" I ask.

"Patch?" The bleeps are going. I shove 5p in the slot. "Where are you?"

"Down the Light" I say. Agi has pronounced 'The Light' strictly out-of-bounds. Situated at the edge of the council estate, at the corner of Windsor Drive and Balmoral Avenue, it illuminates the backs of the garages, spray-canned with hearts and 4-evers. Over the other side of the road is the railway track where, as kids, we used to play Chicken (another Agi no-no. For once, she actually had a point.). This is the meeting place for bored teenagers.

"What are you up to?" asks Tina.

The floor of the telephone box is ankle-deep in cigarette packets and beer cans. Someone's grozzed up on the window too. It stinks. I wedge the door open with my foot. "Dad's done a bunk," I say, my voice nonchalant. "Bird called Eileen."

Tina lets out a contemptuous sigh. "Christ, that bloke's a tosser."

"He packed his bags this afternoon. Picking up the rest of his stuff tomorrow." I step on something pink and spooky-looking. A condom. Gross. "Agi's shit-faced. She's been popping loony-pastilles all afternoon and slugging vermouth. I left her snoring in front of *Tonight's the Night*."

"Poor Patch. Listen, do you want to come and stay?"

"I've got school tomorrow."

Tina has pulled away from the receiver and is yelling in the distance, "John?" There are mumbled voices of concern. Back in my ear now: "John'll pick you up on Friday."

"Magic" I say, no longer caring whether Agi agrees or not. I'm going.

"There's always a bed for you here. Stay as long as you like."

There is a silence. "Oh well" I say, eventually. "I suppose I'd better check Agi hasn't choked on her own vomit."

"Yeah" says Tina. "Chin up."

I closed the photograph album. I had a sudden recollection of John reversing out of the drive at *Fallowfield* – his arm across the back of the passenger seat, the line of his neck as

he'd twisted his head, the way he'd narrowed his eyes as he'd crunched the gears. I stubbed out my cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. I supposed I ought to try and get some sleep.

Chapter Six

I travelled down to Redwater on Friday evening. Next morning, over breakfast, Francesca seemed chirpy and suggested a shopping-trip into town.

“For anything in particular?” I’d asked.

“Oh -” Francesca waved an elegant hand. “This and that.”

It was pissing down when we got to the High Street. At *Westgate*, a blocked drain foamed and flooded the road. Cars and buses surfed through grey water, splattering the legs of pedestrians with vague filth. In the half-built precinct, there were *shop-units-to-let* signs over boarded fronts. Music thudded from nowhere. Vacant buildings had temporarily been taken over by vendors doing a roaring trade in fairy lights and wrapping paper. I recognised a Chinese-looking pixie from a shock-horror-probe documentary: *yuletide-deathtrap*. It glittered merrily. Sprayed over the windows of *Mandala – Body-Art and Piercing*, was *Go Pagan this Christmas. 15% discount on all Celtic designs*. Some poor bastard, soaked to the skin in a Santa-hat, was asking passers-by for spare change. A string-coloured mongrel was tucked up in a blanket next to him, under a broken-umbrella-and-plastic-supermarket-bag canopy. Francesca crouched down, asked the guy what the dog’s name was - ‘Lucky’ - and fondled its head. Then, standing up a bit stiffly, she got out her purse, gave the guy a fiver and wished him well.

I bought some fags. Francesca needed to get her prescription. While we waited in the chemists, she picked up a packet of travel sweets and then turned to the shelf of handcreams. She passed over the bumper-sized (20% extra free) bottles and selected a small, extortionate tube of something which contained attar of roses and said *intensive care* on the label.

Afterwards, Francesca said she wanted to get her Christmas cards done early so we stopped at a stationery shop. By now, almost everything she said or did seemed to have something fatalistic about it. She chose a couple of packs with Renaissance Madonnas on the front.

“But Francesca, they’re hideous.”

“Who cares, darling? I certainly don’t.”

Each card contained a biblical quote - *for unto you this day a saviour is born*. The back of the box said *Cancer Research*.

We turned left, into the older, more exclusive part of Redwater. The shops in these narrow streets were half-timbered and jettied. We passed a florist’s, a small art gallery, an

estate agent's, with rambling country houses in the window, and stopped at a small boutique. *Jaquaranda*. Francesca scrutinised the mannequins in the window and then pushed open the door.

I was used to shopping in places where the thud of the music was so loud you had to yell for your size to a bare-midriffed 16 year old, only to have screamed back "if it ain't on the rack we ain't got it." Here, a vase of lilies sat on a mahogany table. A CD player on a shelf above the till worked through the exposition of Mozart's Prague Symphony. Idly, I thumbed through a rack of cotton jackets. Prices started around £150.

The school-ma'am-ish proprietress had spotted Francesca eyeing the place up from outside, and leapt into action as soon as the bell jangled. She eyed my crew cut and nose ring with a stony smile. "May I help you, Madam?" For a moment I thought she was taking the piss. I'd never heard anybody call anyone Madam outside of TV sit-coms.

I don't think it was the small, crisp fart that set Francesca off, so much as the shop owner's attempt at recreating the sound by scraping her chair across the carpet. Francesca turned her laugh into a spluttery cough and clung onto the rail of Twilight Collection Lingerie, her back heaving.

"For God's sake, Francesca," I hissed. There was even a slight odour. Francesca was becoming hysterical.

"Is everything alright?" the proprietress demanded.

"Fine, thanks." I grabbed Francesca's elbow and marched her out onto the street. She was still tittering and dabbing at her eyes with a tissue five minutes later.

We went for a coffee and sat in the window, watching the umbrellas of the secretaries, accountants and tellers on their lunch breaks. We listened to the hiss and rumble of the espresso machine. Francesca sighed and sipped froth from her cappuccino out of a spoon. She looked thoughtful.

"Patch!" yelled a voice. I turned.

Dawn was standing in the open doorway to the shop, carrying multitudinous carriers of boring-looking shopping, which she manoeuvred past chairs and tables.

"Fancy seeing you here." She dumped the bags in a heap at my feet and turned to Francesca. "How are you feeling?"

"A good deal better, thank you, Dawn."

"I am glad," she said, plumping herself down into the seat next to me, uninvited.

"Praise the Lord. Phew. I'm all in. Christmas shopping." She muttered something about

towels at *Pricebusters* and smiled. "Looks like the whole of Redwater had the same idea." The carriers all came from discount-shops. *Odds-and-Ends*. *Thrift-o-rama*. *Everything's-a-Pound*.

"How's Neville?" asked Francesca.

"Full of beans. He took some of our young people to a rally last night. *Youth Against Lucifer*. Denise had a flour-bomb thrown at her." Dawn mentioned the name of an American Evangelist I'd heard of and turned to me. "Why don't we go out tomorrow afternoon? Have a natter about old times."

"That'll be nice," said Francesca, and, before I could interrupt, added disastrously "I'll be fine on my own."

"Great" said Dawn. "We can go for a drink at *The Haywain*. Meet me at church."

"Thanks a lot," I groused, after Dawn had left.

Francesca chuckled. "Do your own dirty work."

We had to go down *Bishopsgate* to get to the taxi rank. Francesca stopped outside a clothes shop. "I wonder if they have that in green" she said and, in no time, was rifling through the dress rack. She pulled out a dress in moss-coloured silk and held it to my chest. "You have such beautiful brown eyes. Chestnut. You should stick to autumn colours."

The end of the holidays. The days are still clear and blue but there is a chill in the mornings that augurs the end of Summer. Agi is altering my new, bottle-green school skirt on her ancient sewing machine next door, in the dining room. It is Saturday morning. Tina's first single has hit the top twenty. She's making a guest appearance on a kid's show. She is laughing at the magician who is twisting balloons. Fantastabongo – a rabbit!

The presenter picks up the telephone and says "we have a caller on line two. It's - " the camera moves suddenly to close up on Tina's face. There is gunge on Tina's cheek. She has been slimed by the Slime Monster. " - Tracey from Newcastle."

"Hello Tracey" sings Tina into the telephone.

"Hi" breathes the faceless Geordie accent. In the background, a balloon bursts with a bang. The children in the studio shriek.

"Tracey, what did you want to ask Tina Petty?"

"Hello Tina" (again).

"Hi Tracey" (again).

Tracey's voice says slowly and carefully, like she's reading from a cue card "do you have any brothers or sliss... ?" She tries again "Brothers or sliss..."

Tina laughs. "Yes. I have a little sister called Emma."

"How old is she?" asks Jason, the co-host, in blue dungarees.

"Eleven." Tina laughs. "I don't see nearly enough of her, 'cos I'm on tour so much, but we do chat on the phone a lot. Actually" she lowers her voice to a confidential whisper, as if the whole of the British Isles can't hear her "she starts her new school next week, and she's a bit worried about it. If you're out there" she waves at the camera, "I'm thinking of you. Go for it, Patch! You show 'em."

"Mum" I call. "Quick." But by the time she gets there, Tina is performing her song (the slime has miraculously disappeared from her cheek), *I Thought About You Yesterday*.

"She was talking about me."

Agi eyes the television resentfully and tells me to put the skirt on so she can check the length.

"Try it on," said Francesca.

"We aren't shopping for me," I said.

"Don't be tiresome." Francesca set her mouth in a stubborn line.

In the changing rooms, I undressed, then tugged the dress down over my bandage-grey bra (Dominic had once put it in the wash with his designer jeans). I looked in the mirror.

"There" said Francesca, triumphantly. "Perfect." Francesca was right. I suddenly realised I'd never really stopped dressing like a student. "You have a nice figure. You should show it off."

I felt embarrassed by her scrutiny. "You're joking." I looked at myself in the mirror again. Not fat, exactly, but my chest was huge (an unwelcome Agi legacy). Usually I camouflaged it with baggy sweatshirts and shapeless men's jackets. In a swimsuit, I looked like something from an end-of-pier postcard. I slipped off the dress and considered buying it for a moment. Then I caught sight of the price-tag. "Why don't you try something on?" I said.

Outside, on the street, Francesca handed me a bag. "Happy Christmas" she said.

"Francesca -"

I caught sight of our reflection in the shop window. Me in my scruffy sweatshirt, my eyes looking enormous and black and Francesca in her snazzily-cut coat. Her pale skin was stretched tightly across her cheekbones. She looked strangely young and untouched. Nevertheless, I could visualise the lump in her head – grey and glistening and vein-covered - eating away at the very part of her that made her who she was.

“Do you want it now,” smiled Francesca, “or are you going to be dreary and make me wrap it?”

Chapter Seven

Sunday lunchtime. The wind had picked up, sending old crisp packets and newspapers dancing down the themed cul-de-sacs: *Latimer Drive, Cranmer Close, Ridley Crescent*. I was early. As I leaned my bike against the wall at Redwater Baptist Church, I could hear congregational singing.

The church stood in the middle of a housing estate. In the garden opposite, sparrows squabbled. The air smelled of gravy. I opened the heavy door a crack and jammed myself into one of the few vacant seats at the back of the church. On a table next to me was a velvet collection pouch and an assortment of leaflets with sunrises, pine forests and snow-capped mountains. On the front of a children's Bible, an improbably blond Jesus held out his hands to the children sitting at his feet. The church was in silence. I could hear myself breathing. Neville was sitting motionless, facing the congregation. His eyes were closed, his hands clasped on his lap. There were yellow and white flowers sprouting from green oases on each windowsill. There was a draped trestle displaying platted loaves, a pumpkin, apples that had started to desiccate and, rather incongruously I thought, a packet of digestive biscuits. *Praise God from whom all blessings flow!* The banner was a tatty collage of crepe-paper and milk-bottle tops. So this was charismatic Christianity: floor polish, not incense; UPVC windows instead of stained glass with angels, disciples and dragons. No vestments. No Christ on the cross, eyes raised heavenwards, face fixed in ecstasy. Perhaps God had become less fussy with age.

A quavery voice pierced the stillness. Dawn in a yellow cardigan had started singing *He is my everything, He is my life*. Her arms rose and she smiled blindly at the ceiling. There was something sinister and drugged-looking about her. I thought of the Jonestown Massacre. Then someone else joined in. Then someone else. Soon the whole church was singing, hands raised and swaying gently like weed at the bottom of a shallow, slow-running river. Someone at the front started gabbling incomprehensibly. Then everyone began to sing *I love Jesus, oh, I do*. Louder, and more affirmed. When the hymn finished, the final chord seemed to hang in the air. Neville leapt to his feet. "Hallelujah" he yelled. "*Praise the Lord with the lyre, make melody to Him with the harp of ten strings!*" I noticed the broken guitar leaning against the dais and studied the congregation for signs of self-consciousness. There were none.

Neville read part of a letter from someone abroad, distributing cast-off spectacles in

Kenya, then he opened his bible. My mind wandered. I thought of Tina.

Neville cleared his throat and started to read:

“A man appeared – Jairus was his name and he was President of the Synagogue. Throwing himself at Jesus’ feet, he begged him to come to the house because he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.”

The case for unpremeditated suicide was conclusive enough: Tina’s bag had been found in the glove compartment of her crashed car, along with her money, credit cards, soggy fags. An empty litre bottle of bourbon had been found under the dashboard. John confirmed that none of her clothes or personal effects was missing from Woodside.

The conclusion of the police investigations at the time was that Tina had been thrown clear during the impact of her car onto the rocks below Boddle Head (a spot renowned for suicides) and that the subsequent high tide had washed her body out to sea. The evening Tina vanished had been a sweltering one. The roof of her convertible had been down and she rarely condescended to wear a seatbelt. The estuary was famous for its strong tides and powerful undercurrent. An expert, armed with graphs and charts with arrows that represented the prevailing currents in that stretch of water, affirmed the likelihood of Tina’s body being carried out far out into the Atlantic. Nevertheless, I still found it difficult to believe that, in this day and age, a body could disappear so entirely without trace.

Neville’s nasal accents filled the church. He looked up from the lectern and smiled.

“Weep no more – she is not dead – she is asleep.”

I thought of how, as Agi and I were packing to go to Hungary that summer, police had discovered a mess of human remains in the basement of a Greenwich terrace. The bones belonged to four unfortunate women. *Theresa Malone (prostitute), Heather Compton (cabaret performer), Jessica Dring (junkie), Pat Delaney (psychiatric patient)*. The press had printed pictures of them. Three smiling faces, cropped from school and wedding albums and one, grainy closed-circuit camera still. I remembered scrutinising the fuzzy resolution, astonished at the lack of premonition in their faces.

“... Jesus took hold of her hand and called her: ‘Get up, my child’. Her spirit returned, she stood up immediately.”

How could people believe this crap? That miracles could still happen?

“Wasn’t that wonderful?” said Dawn, once we had finally left the church.

“Yeah,” I said, quickening my pace. I’d spotted *The Haywain* at the head of the T-junction. I was freezing and dying for a fag.

Dawn still looked flushed. She didn’t look at me when she said “you know, It’s only when I worship the Lord that I feel truly at peace.” I stared at her. “Jesus is Lord, praise be,” she murmured. Her eyes were a little over-bright.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Dawn?” I caught the edge of her sleeve and pulled her round to face me. Her shoulders were heaving. I dragged her into an adjacent bus shelter where we sat on the red plastic seats.

“I’m sorry to be so silly, Patch,” she sobbed.

“You’re not. What’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She turned to get up and pull away.

“Of course it’s not nothing if it’s making you unhappy. Tell me.”

Dawn sniffed. “It’s just that Neville is so busy all the time. I hardly see him these days. I try so hard to be worthy of the Lord’s love. I run the women’s group ... Sunday school ... cook ... house looking nice.” She swallowed. “I get so depressed. It’s why I eat so much. I know I’m a burden.”

“Have you talked to Neville about this?”

“We’ve prayed together.”

I huffed in exasperation. “Neville needs a good kick up the arse.”

She frowned. “I really envy you.”

“Come off it, Dawn.”

“No, really.” She reached into her hand and pulled out a fluffy pink tissue. She blew loudly. Her nose glistened as she wiped. “People always like you,” she said, flatly.

“For Heaven’s sake, Dawn. I’m sure they like you too.” She raised her hand to her mouth, nibbled at a loose hangnail and said nothing. “Look,” I said, finally. “Are you sure about this church thing?”

For a split second, she looked absolutely terrified. “Oh, it’s not that,” she said, shaking her head. “The Lord is so good to me.” She stood up, stuck her dirty tissue up her sleeve, then laughed strangely. “Look at us – aren’t we a pair - sitting in this bus shelter? Come on. Let’s go and have that drink.”

The Haywain was one of those chain pubs with laminated Gothic-script menus and rusticated furniture. The place was heaving. A barmaid tugged a drawer full of steaming glasses out of a dishwasher. Her sweaty face reflected the multi-coloured fairy lights hanging above the optics.

A corporately-chirpy waitress approached us, brandishing an order-pad. "Have you ever been to a *Haywain* before?"

Dawn resentfully motioned her away. "We're not eating."

I was starving.

"Here" said Dawn, as I returned from the loo five minutes later. "I remembered your tippie."

I took a sip. Sweet, slightly vomit-smelling, cider. "Perfect," I said.

Across the Perspex dance-floor, I spot Stringer's white-blond head. A summer outdoors has turned his skin the colour of milky coffee. His jeans are tight. My stomach does a somersault.

"... half a cider and a *Dubonnet* with lemon" screams Dawn at the barman. We are elated at having passed for eighteen. "Ke-ev." She waves her skinny arms furiously. "What are you having?"

"Lager-top."

Dawn turns back to the bar and Stringer approaches. I am tongue-tied and defensively aggressive. "Crap music" I complain in bored tones. My buckle-boots have given me blisters.

"S'pose so." Silence. A couple in the corner are French kissing. I try not to notice.

Stringer scratches his forearm. "Ace tattoos" I say.

"Ta."

I touch the ragged lettering. Fuck knows what *Slash-Zone* is. Probably some heavy-metal outfit I've never heard of. His skin is smooth and hot. "You could do one on me sometime."

"Might." He thinks for a moment. "Hurts like fuck."

"Don't care."

He shrugs. "Up to you."

Dawn is juggling drinks to the table. Neither Stringer nor I move to help. She gushes in a way that makes me want to disown her: "Patch is from London. Staying with her sister. Tina Petty. You know, the pop star."

"Oh." Stringer looks at me and leers filthily. "Microphone-girl."

I punch him lightly in the stomach. "Yeah, right. Fucking hilarious. Anyway, it's not true."

Dawn looks confused. "What?"

Stringer smiles at me. "I'd like to meet your sister," he says.

As I lit a cigarette, Dawn leaned over the table and indicated a couple sitting next to us. "He's married – the woman's not" she hissed.

"How do you know?"

"Heard them talking."

I studied the couple. The man was a City type – quite good-looking. He wore a gold watch. The woman was stylish and confident. "God, this place is a dive" she giggled.

"Perfect. No chance of bumping into anyone we know."

She was suddenly serious. "Michael, you've got to tell her. This just isn't fair."

"When the time's right."

"The time will never be right. The longer you leave it, the worse it'll be."

I noticed Dawn, pinched with disapproval. "Chill out, Dawn; it happens all the time."

"That doesn't make it alright. Woman like her should know better," muttered Dawn.

"What about him? He's the one that's married." I said, amused.

"Well," she sighed, "that's just the way men are, given half a chance. They can't help themselves. They have biological urges."

I stifled a smile as I tried to picture Dominic in the grip of an uncontrollable biological urge and failed. He didn't seem to be interested in anything unless it had jack-plugs and a keyboard.

"Luckily," continued Dawn, "Neville has the Lord to keep him strong."

It was all I could do not to give in to a fit of the giggles.

Another waitress bustled towards us. "Have you ever been to a *Hay*..."

"A plate of chips, please" I said, before Dawn had a chance to intervene.

Dawn mellowed slightly. "Do you see anything of John Fairfax these days?"

"Lost touch after Tina disappeared."

“You two always seemed really close.”

I shrugged.

“You know,” mused Dawn, “I used to feel sorry for him. What with Tina being so promiscuous and everything.”

I nearly choked on my cigarette. “Crap,” I said, a bit too forcefully.

Dawn sipped her drink and looked worried. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dawn flicked her hair back off her face and sighed. “A couple of years before she disappeared, I was off sick from school. Tonsillitis. I went along with my Mum to *Woodside* while she cleaned. I saw Tina and that drummer from her band – Ricky something – in the swimming pool. They couldn’t keep their hands off each other.”

I laughed. “Oh, is that all? I think you’ve got the wrong end of the stick. Tina was always all-over people she liked. It got her into no end of trouble.”

Dawn sipped the last of her ludicrous fruit cocktail and looked unconvinced. “It wasn’t just that. Later that week, I saw John with Mrs Dashwood in the garden. It was really sad, Patch.” She shook her head. “I’d never seen a man cry before. I’m used to it now, of course – what with the church and all.”

I remembered the fervent losers from the congregation and Dawn in her yellow cardigan. He is my everything, He is my life... “What was he saying?”

“Oh.” She frowned. Perhaps she was embarrassed about her inadvertent eavesdropping. “They were too far away for me to hear. You know, I always liked John. He was the only one who was ever nice to me.” Dawn was blushing. “Like I say, I felt sorry for him. You can’t blame a man for what he does under those circumstances.”

Now she’d completely lost me. “What do you mean by that?”

Dawn laughed a little forcedly, “oh goodness, Patch, nothing in particular,” and picked up my glass. “Same again?”

That afternoon, while Francesca was asleep, I took a stroll down the garden. Past the gazebo that John had once built. Past the tennis courts (now the nets were rotting and the tarmac surface was patchy with moss). I hopped across the stepping stones on Francesca’s vegetable

plot. There was bindweed growing through the raspberry canes and the netting on the cage fluttered loosely in the wind. Right at the bottom, behind the Summer House, I stopped. The gap in the beech hedge had grown over, now, but I could still see the rock that Dawn had used as a vantage point that summer. I wondered if it had been from here that she'd seen John crying.

"Patch – can you keep a secret?"

Dawn and I are walking through the woods at the back of *Fallowfield*. Even under the trees, it's sweltering. Thunder flies are sticking to the sweat on my arms and forehead. "Course," I say.

She veers off the path, suddenly, and starts wading through the bracken, over a mossy bank and up a small hillock. We grab branches to haul ourselves up through the nettles. At the top is a large, flat rock. From up here, through the leaves, you can see the whole of *Fallowfield's* garden – from the back of the Summer House directly in front of us, right across the tennis courts to *Fallowfield* itself. A man in a wheelchair (whom I guess, correctly, must be Freddie, Francesca's husband) reads on the patio next to the pond. Dawn giggles as she sits down.

"Go on, then, what's the secret?" I ask.

She widens her eyes, and motions around the hawthorn and elder canopy. "This." She sees me frown. "It's my hiding place," she confides.

The rock is encrusted with tiny fossilised shells, but we're miles from the sea.

"I can watch all the comings and goings from here," says Dawn. "I like it. You know – me seeing them, and them not seeing me. Mrs Dashwood had a garden party last month. It was brilliant. I could see everything."

I tug out a packet of fags I've nicked from Tina's glove compartment. "That's spying," I say. I watch two cabbage whites dance in the air above the roses.

"Free country." Dawn is a little defensive. Her fine hair is stuck flat to the top of her head, like seaweed. She smells slightly of oxtail soup. "Not doing any harm, am I?"

"Spose not," I shrug and offer her a cigarette.

"Mrs Dashwood feeds the birds every morning at about nine," said Dawn. "She has a fish delivery every Thursday morning. John comes on Wednesdays and Fridays usually to do the garden. Takes his top off if it's hot." She narrows her eyes, takes little, shallow puffs on

her cigarette and coughs slightly. “Wish I had a sister who’s a popstar,” she says wistfully.
“Nothing exciting ever happens to me.”

Chapter Eight

I woke late the next morning. By the time I had showered and dressed, it was nearly ten. Francesca was in her lavender kimono, sipping *Lapsang*. She was hunched over the kitchen table.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Headache,” she whispered. I never knew what to say when she said that; headache in the context of Francesca acquired a significance wholly at odds with the ubiquitous two aspirins and a breath of air it meant to most people. She looked awful. Her skin was grey. “Darling, take John a cup of coffee.”

“John?”

“Next to the garage. He’s unblocking the guttering.”

It was a fine November morning. The sun made the damp leaves on the grass shine. Steam wafted from the cup as I walked outside. John was standing at the top of a step-ladder, chucking fistfuls of brownish gunk onto the lawn below.

“I’ll leave your coffee down here,” I said.

John twisted his head. “Thanks.”

“Biscuits,” I said, dumping the barrel onto the wet grass. It fell onto its side.

“Patch?” called John.

I continued walking, pretending not to hear him and slammed the kitchen door.

“For God’s sake, Patch.” John knees the car door shut and strides over the moonlit lawn towards me.

“What?” I belch dry-roasted peanuts, supporting myself on the flimsy wooden arch, hardly able to stand.

“Bad pint was it?”

“I don’t need a fucking lecture.” The splattering of vomit on the patio surprises me.

“Clarissa, you look ravishing tonight,” says John.

“Give me a break.” I retch again. Shreds of tomato skin soil his flip-flops, and, somehow, I manage to spray pinkish filth onto the script he’s carrying.

John fumbles in his pocket for a tissue. “What on earth have you been drinking?”

“Cider.” I think for a moment. “And vodka.”

He slips an arm around my shoulders. “Come on,” he says. “Start walking.”

“Why?”

He doesn't answer. We career across the lawn, lurch down the drive, stagger along the road at the back.

“Ouch, fuck, I've twisted my ankle!”

“Ah, Satterlova, the prima ballerina. Will she ever dance again?”

“No, please, John, I'm being serious. It really hurts.”

“Let's have a look then.”

I sit on a nearby tree-stump. John crouches in front of me and tugs my shoe and sock off. He inspects my foot and gives it a rub. “Just don't ask me to kiss it better.”

“John?”

“What?”

“I wish you and Tina didn't (vommy belch) argue so much.”

John continues rubbing silently. “So do I” he says, eventually. “There – can you walk on it now?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Whoa!”

I topple over again. The grass tickles my cheek. “I'm sleepy” I yawn, and close my eyes.

“Oi!” He tugs me up by the armpits. “Not here.”

I stare up at him. “You know,” I slur. “I really love you, John.”

“Yeah, right. You're me besht friend!”

“What's so funny?”

“Come on, Patch. Bed.”

“Does John need anything else?” asked Francesca. Her eyes were bright and red.

“Shouldn't think so” I shrugged. “Do you want some toast?”

She shook her head. “Later, perhaps.”

“I could boil you an egg.”

“Patch, please!”

The legs of the table scraped sharply against the flagstones as she lurched forward. A jug of milk crashed to the floor. “Francesca” I rushed over hardly knowing whether it was safe for me to touch her.

“Got up a bit too quickly,” she gasped.

I scanned the cork notice board and found what I was looking for. *Surgery Hours.*
The emergency number is available through the answering machine.

"No," said Francesca.

I picked up the telephone.

"Please Patch." Francesca held out her hand. "Don't."

I stretched the cord so the telephone was out of reach.

"For God's sake, stop fussing." She tried to snatch the receiver. Blue veins stood out on the backs of her hands. "I'm fine now. Really I am." She plucked at the coiled wire. Her hands were trembling.

"Sit down, Francesca, and stop being so fucking stupid."

We both paused. Emil was quietly lapping up the pool of milk that had formed under the kitchen table.

Francesca's back started heaving. "I wish people would leave me alone" she sobbed, staggering out of the room.

I dialled. The doctor said she'd be there within the hour. I swept up the broken china and emptied it into the dustbin outside the back door. On the apex of the shed, a blackbird puffed out its chest and started to sing. I began to cry.

"What's up?" I hadn't noticed John approaching. He had his back to the sun.

"Francesca's had a dizzy spell," I sobbed.

"You've called the doctor?"

"Of course." I clamped my jaw together and blinked hard.

John went into the kitchen and returned with a wadge of kitchen towel. I took it and blew noisily. "You should have called me."

"What for? I can cope."

Fallowfield was a mess of chimney pots that led nowhere. Hearths which no longer had fireplaces and bits of mysterious tubing which on closer inspection probably served bathrooms which had long since been turned into linen cupboards. There was a strange, twisted copper tube that I had got used to serving no better purpose than to support a wound-up hosepipe. It suddenly began belching filthy water, which plashed noisily about the muddy lawn.

"Houston, we have a problem," said John, striding towards the house.

I found him a few moments later on all fours in the bathroom mopping up a deluge. “Oh, me poor back,” he groaned. “Five hungry mouths and my old Albert pushing up daisies.”

“Fuck, what happened?”

“Francesca must have left the bath running,” said John.

“Why the hell didn’t she ask me to run it?” I fumed.

“It’s no big deal. I’ve mopped up.”

I paused for a moment. “Thanks.”

“Any chance of a cup o’ tea, love?” he chirped.

I was back five minutes later clutching two steaming mugs. John was wringing a filthy towel into the bath. I sat on the closed loo seat. “She worries me,” I said. “Suppose no one had been here?”

“So she floods the bathroom. It’s hardly the end of the world.”

“I found the grill turned up full-blast this morning. She’s not safe on her own.”

“I’m here to keep an eye on things.”

“Like you were for me?” This slipped out before I could check myself.

John turned to face me. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

He thought for a moment and then sighed. “So, that’s what all the chilly looks are about. You’re still angry with me.”

“You never returned my calls. Never got in touch.”

“For God’s sake, Patch, it was fifteen years ago.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“It was nothing personal. Life had gone haywire.”

“I’d lost Tina too,” I said, quietly. Emil nosed the bathroom door open, rested his muzzle on my knee and whined. I stroked his ears as I said, “I thought we were friends.”

John stood up and chucked the towel into the bath. “We are, aren’t we?”

I didn’t answer.

Chapter Nine

The next day Francesca had made a seemingly miraculous recovery. A crazy thought ran through my head – it involved the power of prayer. As time went by, I was to realise these soarings and divings were symptomatic of her condition. One evening she could be sick to the point of semi-consciousness, to awake next day demanding to be fitted into her hairdresser's overcrowded appointment-book.

"For fuck's sake, Emil, this is not a game."

Emil had rolled in something revolting in the garden. I was up in the bathroom, giving him a wash.

Francesca, perched on the loo seat, sipped her mint tea. "Patch, you're wetter than he is," she observed. Emil barked and turned his head to chomp at the water jet coming from the shower head. "He knows you're a soft touch," said Francesca. "You'll never regain your authority."

"Sit!" I commanded. Emil licked my face and wagged his tail. Francesca passed me an expensive-looking shampoo with extract of camomile and honey. "Dawn's really miserable," I said, carrying on the conversation I'd been having with Francesca about last Sunday's drink at *The Haywain*. "Neville's a tosser."

"Nonsense," said Francesca. "What on earth makes you say that?"

I frothed up Emil's spotty coat and shrugged. "Too busy being holier-than-anyone-ever to notice her. Treats her like a skivvy. Sit still." This last bit was directed at Emil who had decided he had had enough and was trying to clamber over the side of the bath. The noise his claws were making on the enamel set my teeth on edge.

"Neville's very fond of her," said Francesca. She clicked her tongue. "The girl's a complete neurotic."

"Not surprised, shacked up with him," I said.

"No Patch," said Francesca, firmly. "I mean, she has problems."

I thought of how Dawn chewed her tongue and occasionally gazed blindly into the middle distance, or as she smiled and spoke of Jesus. "What – clinical ones, you mean?"

"Of course 'clinical ones'." Francesca sighed. "She's always had difficulties fitting in. Been on medication for years. On the whole, I thought it a positive step when she joined the church. It wasn't healthy for an adolescent to be on her own so much, hanging around the

houses of the middle aged. She's never been terribly bright. What we used to call off at Upton Park." I must have looked blank. "Two stops short of Barking."

I lifted up Emil's paws to scrub between his pads. He seemed not to like it much, and splashed about, yelping and rolling his eyes.

"Dawn told tales at school" continued Francesca. "It made her terribly unpopular."

"She wasn't at school, that week I stayed with Tina and John," I said. "Was that the reason why?"

Francesca shook her head. "She'd been receiving anonymous letters. There was a terrible rumpus about it. The police became involved. Even a graphologist."

"Did they ever find out who'd been writing them?" I asked.

Francesca sighed. "They said Dawn had been writing them to herself."

I felt a sudden wave of sympathy for Dawn. Poor kid. "Dawn said Tina was unfaithful to John," I said, picking up the showerhead and testing the water. "With Ricky Chesney, of all people. I didn't believe her, of course." Francesca paused. I watched the suds run off Emil's back and down his haunches. "I mean, Tina was crazy about John."

"Yes, she was," said Francesca and then was quiet.

I stopped rubbing Emil's chin. "Francesca?"

"Darling, it was a long time ago."

There was a yelp. "Oh shit. Sorry, Emil." I hadn't been watching what I'd been doing and had got soap in his eyes. I rinsed it off. "So it's true?" I said, slowly.

"Darling, every couple has its ups and downs. They were no exception."

I turned off the taps and picked up a towel.

"Does it really make any difference?" she asked, eventually.

Of course it did. "It's a bit of a shock," I said.

John arrived at lunchtime to run a shopping-errand for Francesca ("Shall I take the Bentley M'Lady?"). The nearest half-decent supermarket was the other side of Redwater. He asked if I wanted to come. When she saw me hesitate, Francesca smiled breezily. "Off you go, Patch."

As we travelled in silence through the high street, I thought of what Dawn had told me about Tina's infidelity. No wonder John and she had argued so much. I remembered my last stay in Redwater and how, as Tina had fallen to pieces, John had taken care of me.

Underneath his jokey exterior, he must have been going through hell. I supposed I couldn't blame him for wanting to lose contact with me after she vanished. Probably staying in touch would have provoked too many bad memories. I realised it wasn't fair of me to keep dwelling on the past and decided to give our friendship another go, for Francesca's sake.

At the supermarket, I loaded the trolley with those stickered foods that they recommended as part of a *Healthy Living* initiative: the highest-roughage bread, the organic-est yoghurt, and the lowest low-fat skimmed milk produced by (if you believed the illustration) cows in leotards and sweat-bands. Then I remembered how Francesca poked at her food, and how every mouthful was an effort.

John smiled and shook his head as I skidded back against the general trolley flow, replacing everything we'd so carefully chosen (I wasn't too careful – a packet of crispbread found its way onto a shelf of soap-powders). Then I reloaded with chocolate-fudge-dipped cream horns, a still-warm pumpkin-seed-and-sesame loaf, *Dolcelatte*, high-cruelty duck-liver paté (Francesca's favourite), anchovy-stuffed olives – yuk - and the priciest bottle of wine in the shop (and even that didn't seem quite expensive enough). On the way to the checkout, we passed a flower stall. I stuffed some yellow chrysanths (the best of a bad lot) into the basket and queued. A boss-eyed child pissed itself as we waited and somebody dropped a watermelon. I remembered why I hated supermarkets.

On the way back we stopped at a petrol station and bought a couple of cans of ginger beer. John took the pretty way back, through winding country lanes and up into the forest. We passed warning signs – for deer, snakes, badgers. I fumbled for something to say. "Are you working at the moment?" was the best I could manage.

"Can't tell a lie," he sighed, campily. "Resting at present dahling."

"Francesca mentioned some detective thing."

"Not till January."

"What part are you playing?"

John turned to me and grinned. "A masked psychopath who turns out to be the family GP." There was a crunching sound as he changed gear. "Whoops, just given the plot away; I'm afraid I'm going to have to kill you." I smiled. "In March, I'm playing Jokanaan in *Salomé* at the *National*. That might be worth seeing – Rachel Monterey's playing Herodias. Call me for comps."

"Thanks."

"Bring your boyfriend."

I stared out of the window. Sections of the forest had intriguing names: *Old Prospect*. *Dead Boy's Acre*. *Devil's Footstool*. "Francesca says you're back at *Woodside*."

"Yep. Tenants left it in a hell of a mess. Should have had the blighters shot." John braked suddenly as a tractor appeared around the bend, and pulled into the grass verge to let it pass. Branches scraped against the window. I couldn't help stamping on an imaginary brake-pedal. "I'm in London, mostly." The guy driving the tractor had a roll-up dangling from his lips. He raised his hand in thanks as he passed and John pulled off again.

At the brow of the hill, we rounded a corner. Stretched out in front of us, was dense, pine forest. I watched a buzzard hover and then plummet behind the trees. London felt a million miles away. I thought of my flat. Nowhere to park. The sweetish-smelling dustbins outside the front door. The peeling paint in the communal hall. I sighed. "It's lovely here."

John didn't trouble to decelerate as we hit a lay-by. We skidded on wet leaves and lurched to a halt. I felt a little queasy on noticing the sheer drop on the other side over the barrier. John seemed unconcerned by our near-death experience. I had thought as a teenager that his cavalier driving was a macho affectation. Now I realised the truth; he was just a shit driver. "I used to come up here as a kid," he said. "Let's get out."

"Why?" I asked. It was drizzling slightly.

He didn't reply, just marched up the muddy track. I panted as I tried to catch up. As soon as the woodland cleared, though, I had my answer. The view was unexpected and spectacular.

"There" he said, breathing a little unevenly, "worth getting a bit wet for, eh?"

In the distance, a cloud had fissured to allow an immense shaft of sunlight through. The river Slaughter glistened unnaturally silver in the valley below us, while we stood in the cool drizzle. The effect was magical. I thought how Francesca would also have been transfixed by the view and wished I could bring her here. I was suddenly aware that, one day, I too would leave the earth and that there were infinitely many beautiful things I would never see either.

Beyond the picnic benches, was a Tourist Information sign – *Temple of Bacchus* – and behind it a ragged grid of weather-washed stones. A few sheep raised their heads as we walked forward, and then continued tugging at the wet grass. I lit a cigarette and offered him one.

"Given up. You should too," he said.

“Still sermonising? I remember you caught me and Dawn smoking and went all earnest and heavy-duty then too.”

“Of course I did; you nicked my cigarettes.”

“And I thought you cared.”

“Kiddo, you wanna cough your way to an early grave, be my guest.” In spite of the Chicago-gangster accent, he didn’t seem to be joking. For a split second I genuinely considered quitting.

I studied the information board. A line-drawing depicted how the place would have looked in first century Roman Britain. A bustling street scene: soldiers, gossiping slaves, mules, children playing. *Artist’s impression by W. B. Dwight (D. Phil.)*. It all seemed hopelessly improbable as I surveyed the piles of rubble. There was an adjacent panel depicting diaphanously-clad Roman maidens being mauled by beefy centurions.

“Bacchus – Ancient God of slap and tickle,” said John, in a nasal Yorkshire accent.

I remembered the swimming-pool at *Woodside*. Tina had commissioned a ceramicist to create a Romanesque mosaic on the bottom. It showed Bacchus and Ariadne; Bacchus with a massive erection and Ariadne – well – gagging for it, basically. Tina called it deliciously decadent. I just found it embarrassing.

“John?” I said as we walked around the trenches of the bathhouse. A few stacks of tiles were all that was left of the hypocaust. “Can I ask you something? About Tina?” I heard a lark, the shuffling grass, even the sound of the sodden earth beneath our feet.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” said John, finally.

John left me and half a dozen carrier bags at *Fallowfield*. I found Francesca huddled up next to the unlaid sitting room fireplace, her unopened book on her lap. The house was freezing. She was snoring gently. I wiped her mouth with a pink tissue from the box next to her. She didn’t wake. I brought her a cup of tea.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fresh as a daisy.”

“Fancy a bite?”

She nodded. I set the dining room table, clearing space among the catalogues, papers and general crap. I rifled through the kitchen drawer, among tangles of string, brown paper

and a dysfunctional icing set. At the back was a box of candles. I stood six in the two silver candelabra and lit them.

I felt happy to see Francesca wolfing down the paté. She managed half a cream horn, a couple of olives, and a whole glass of wine, which she said was very quaffable. I told her about my morning with John.

"I'm delighted you're friends again," said Francesca. She had managed to get a dab of *Dolcelatte* stuck to her cheek. I said nothing. Emil whined from between my feet. Francesca tossed an olive under the table. There was a brief, slobbering noise. "John went through a dreadful time after Tina went. Blamed himself terribly. I was seriously worried he'd go under."

"A breakdown?"

Francesca nodded. "Of course, the press didn't help." She shook her head. "He once caught someone in the tree outside his bedroom window, trying to film inside."

"What happened?"

"John started chain-sawing the tree. The reporter didn't dare climb down – John was beside himself. God knows what would have happened if I hadn't been there."

I remembered the rage John had been in, the morning he crashed his car and felt a fleeting sympathy for the reporter. Then I thought of the journalists that had hung around our house at that time. Agi and I had kept our curtains shut during that intolerably hot July, and lived as if under siege. She would make brief and desperate forays to the supermarket. She banned all newspapers from the house in case they upset me. She even clipped the plug off the telly. "I remember the police interviews," I said. "They kept asking the same questions over and over again. Had I seen anything? Had I heard anything? They wanted to know all about John and Tina's relationship."

Francesca paused. "The police were unusually fastidious." The clock struck five. She put her knife down and waited until the chimes stopped before resuming. "They combed *Woodside, Fallowfield*, the whole area." She gestured her hand in a broad, sweeping movement. "Overturned everything. Stables – loft - cellar. I didn't know till then we even had a well. Heaven knows what they expected to find." She exhaled heavily. "They knew about John's criminal record, of course, and – well - you can imagine what their suspicions must have been." Emil yawned dramatically. I shoved a piece of cheese in his gob. "Still, he's put his past behind him" said Francesca, and began a panegyric on John's achievements. "Appalling background," she concluded. The wine really was quite good. I took another

slug. "His father was a drunk," said Francesca. I put down my glass. "Did you know, he hospitalised John's mother three times? Pretty rough with John, too, until the poor lad grew too big for him." Her features tightened. "I loathe bullies. John was still at school when his mother died." I remembered John had once shown me a picture of her. A dark, smiling woman with eyes as blue as his. "Frightful eczema" she said, suddenly. "All over his hands." Francesca shook her head. "They used to crack and bleed." Then she smiled. "I used to make him soak them in Epsom salts solution." She tossed Emil the remaining paté. It was gone in a gulp. Francesca smiled. "He had beautiful hair."

"Tina made him cut it off," I laughed. I had been ten when Tina had first introduced John to me. He'd had hair down to his waist. I'd thought he looked just like Jesus. She'd met him while performing (as yet unheard-of) at a small South London music-bar. Years later, she would recount over and over again this period of their courtship, enjoying the recollection of each, minute detail: the spilt cappuccino, the washing up after a meal they hadn't been able to pay for, the endless mornings in bed with the phone off the hook. As I grew older I began to realise that this *La Bohème*-flavoured fortnight must have represented the happiest days of Tina's life. I wondered what went wrong.

"He was terribly moody" Francesca mused. "All the girls were mad for him. Go ahead."

I'd taken my cigarettes out of my pocket, and was tapping one on the table. I leaned forward and touched the tip to the candle flame. "What happened to his mother?" I asked.

"Cancer" said Francesca, so simply, that if you didn't know, you would never have guessed.

I thought about a lot of things then, like how it was so fucking unfair. Like how sorry I was for ever taking anything for granted.

"Patch," said Francesca, topping me up, "you have to let things take their course." The bottle jangled against the edge of my glass. I concentrated on blowing a smoke ring. I'd lost the knack. A swirl of smoke, nebulous and spectral, drifted and clung to the ceiling. Outside, the wind was blowing. Tick-a-tick, tick-a-tick. The Georgian clock had brass handles. I thought of home and trains and travel and terminuses. Here today...

"You know, darling" she said, "sometimes life is complete shit."

Candlelight flickered on the stones of Francesca's eternity ring. I couldn't help it; my shoulders started shaking.

I didn't notice Francesca leaving, I only heard the door close.

PART THREE

Tuesday 18th June 1985

Tina had to practice for her gig. Took me along. We were late. Phil's got a new black sports car. Tina called it his penile substitute and said he was earning too much money. Phil loved my new Goth look. Phil's just been to an auction of stuff belonging to Peggy Whyment, the country and western singer who's just died. He bought her croc-skin stetson for five thousand quid. He says it's an investment. Says the Record Company have made a mint since she died. All those re-releases.

Alan, Ricky and Susan were there. I heard Tina's new song Tell-Tale Heart. Not sure I like it, but I didn't say anything. Phil reckons it'll go platinum, but then he would – he wrote it. Ricky got stoned and kept giggling. Susan looked really pissed off. Tina hates her guts. Alan keeps buying stuff for Tina. I reckon he fancies her, but she thinks he's a twat.

Afterwards, we all came back to Woodside. John did a barbecue. Tina let me invite Dawn. She brought Kev.

Phil made a joke about John being a bad actor, and John told him, dead quietly, to cut it out. When he saw I'd heard he pulled a funny face, but I knew he was pissed off. I don't think they like each other very much.

Ricky rolled me a joint and showed me how to inhale for maximum effect. Nothing really happened. John went apeshit and chucked it on the barbecue. Heeeeavyyyyy.

Tina was a bit pissed. She went into the house with Ricky. The kitchen window was open. Me and Dawn could hear Tina and Ricky sniffing a lot and giggling. Then they started talking about Dawn. "God," Tina was saying. "The poor kid. I mean, she really is a dog, isn't she?" Tina can be a real bitch, sometimes. She doesn't even talk to me at the moment.

I felt really sorry for Dawn. She was really upset. Left early.

Afterwards, snogged Kev in the utility room – with tongues. John's had a sense-of-humour by-pass and keeps telling me to be careful. Don't know what his problem is.

Chapter Ten

At school, in Biology, when steel-rimmed Sister Gregory had explained that we were born with all our eggs, it was just another unremarkable fact from a textbook. At that stage, puberty was all the rage, and life seemed endless. Recently, though, the idea had started to bother me. It wasn't that I wanted kids, exactly. It was just that, each month, as I pushed the final contraceptive pill out of its foil strip, I felt a bit as you do the first time you see the second hand of your watch complete a circuit and realise you will never be that young again. I imagined my eggs lining up at the edge of a slippery, fallopian drop, and toppling forward like chocolate bars in a biological vending machine. How long, I wondered, would it be before the red light flashed: *sorry, the selection you have made is unavailable*.

On Tuesday evening, as I filled my hot water bottle, I decided that menstruation was a truly depressing process. It didn't take long for the painkillers to kick in. Dominic sat in the corner of the room with his headphones on. I could hear the plastic rattle of his midi keyboard and occasional tutts as he entered a bum note. I turned on the television and watched the news. The same old wars. The same old politicians. I felt almost hysterical with boredom. I stood up. "Dom" I said wildly. "For fuck's sake, let's go and do something."

Dom turned round. "But I'm in the middle of -"

"I don't care," I said, grabbing his arm, trying to kindle something – anything in him. "You're always working. I haven't seen you all week." He looked a bit guilty. I felt a sudden longing for life as lived by other people, for casual conversation, for laughter, for music you have to shout over. "Let's go to *The Six Bells*," I suggested.

Dominic seemed reluctant. "I think there's a private party."

"So what?" I carefully ironed him a shirt. He took it into the bathroom and locked the door.

"Hurry up" I said, after I had waited for ten minutes in my overcoat, clutching my bag. I was already wondering whether there was any point in proceeding. Any spontaneity the event may have had was withered.

We cut down Robinson Road. From over near the old sanatorium, came the eerie, childlike howling of tomcats. A police car flashed past the T-junction at the end of the road. "Is everything okay?" I asked, as we walked.

"Yeah. Fine. Been working on some new stuff."

“You’re very quiet.” I pushed the heavy door to *The Six Bells*.

The pub was packed. The air was thick with smoke, and the music was deafening. I vaguely recognised a woman from a long-running medic-series, sitting at a table in the corner. She looked older and paler than she did on telly, and when she thanked her friend for her drink, she sounded middle-class and a bit boring.

“Emma!” shouted a voice at my elbow. Nerissa was standing next to me, looking amazing in red chenille. “I’m so glad you could come. Dominic said you might pop by.” It was the first I’d heard of it.

“Hi, Riss,” said Dominic.

She smiled. “How’s the head?”

Dominic seemed uncomfortable. “Okay now” he said and turned to me. “Nerissa’s party, last Saturday. Had a bit of a skin-full.” I had forgotten about the party and Dominic hadn’t mentioned it again.

“You should have seen him.” Nerissa winked, conspiratorially. “Couldn’t stop giggling.” Dominic drunk? I could hardly believe it. She was suddenly serious. “Dom told me about your friend. I’m really sorry.” I liked the way she said it. Direct and unfussy. In the corner of the pub, a skinny kid with dreads was draining a pint, amid cheers from the group he was sitting with. “That’s Aaron, my brother,” said Nerissa. “It’s his eighteenth today.”

Aaron stood up. “Dominic, my man,” he shouted. “We need more beers.”

I was surprised to see how well they knew Dominic. I was glad he’d had made some new friends while I’d been at Francesca’s. I discreetly shoved him twenty quid. “Go on, get a round.”

“We’ll get these,” said Dominic. “Do you want one of those pink things, ‘Riss?”

She giggled. “Watermelon Slammer.” We walked over to the table. “Budge up everyone,” said Nerissa. Aaron was pulling faces and making everyone laugh. “This is Emma.”

There was a chorus of hellos. Nice crowd.

“Hey, cutie, sit next to me,” crooned Aaron. He was a bit pissed and completely inoffensive. I laughed, enjoying the attention.

“Watch it, bruv,” grinned Nerissa. “That’s Dominic’s girl you’re messing with.”

Aaron stood up and flung his arms out, all mock-innocence. It was the kind of good-humoured nonsense I hadn’t enjoyed with Dominic in ages.

As Dom returned with the drinks, the music in the pub stopped. I turned to see a woman stepping out of a police constable's uniform and asking if anyone there had been a naughty boy. Some blokes next to the bar started a slow hand-clap. "*Get yer tits out for the lads, for the lads ...*" Aaron stood on his seat for a better view.

"What are you like," said Nerissa.

Dominic sipped his lager uncomfortably.

The whole performance was over in less than ten minutes. The phoney WPC peeled off her rubber underwear, made a pink-faced guy in a badly-fitting suit lick synthetic cream from her nipples and then raced off to the loos to dress. It had all been cringing and a bit absurd. Afterwards, I thought of Tina.

"And what's this?" I hold out some elastic. I am thirteen years old, amused by the tangle of lace in Tina's underwear drawer.

"It's a G-String, Patch," says Tina, witheringly.

"Where does it go?"

Businesslike, she steps into it and pulls it up over her jeans. The small, triangular crotch is black and furry.

"You must be joking," I say disparagingly. I take out a skimpy item in apricot silk.

"John bought me that," she says. She pulls a white camisole from the drawer and holds it up against herself. She grins "this is for when I'm feeling virginal ..." then unrolls a black and red garment with wickedly stiff whaleboning and ¼-sized bra cups "... and this is for when I'm not."

"What's this?" I point to a ribbed, white plastic thing at the back of her drawer.

"Anyone seen my screwdriver?" John yells, clumping up the stairs.

Tina yells back "go away, John." She takes off the G-String and flings it on the bed. I pick it up and put it over my head, pulling the elastic loops down over my ears and tying them in a knot under my chin. I stretch my face in a demonic smile. Tina lets out a shriek of laughter. She hooks up the black corset behind my back, over my T-shirt. I choose a pair of silk cami-knickers and shove them on as well. Tina propels me towards the full-length mirror in front of their bed. I look like a Music Hall joke.

"I can't find it anywhere." The door opens. John barges in and scans the bedroom, irritated and impervious.

“Well, what do you think?” I ask him, impatiently. For the first time, he notices me and grins. “Very – um – nice, Patch, but I think you’re supposed to wear that stuff under your clothes.”

“I enjoyed that,” I said, unlocking the door to the flat and switching on the light. “Nerissa’s really nice, isn’t she?”

Dominic grunted.

“Fuck,” I said, shivering. “It’s freezing.”

We walked into the sitting room. He pressed the on-button on the computer.

“Dominic, it’s half past eleven,” I said. “Come to bed.”

“In a minute.”

It was nearly two when Dominic finally slid under the duvet.

“Are you awake?” he whispered. Outside, a car rounded the corner, and a trapezoid of light slid around the walls.

“No,” I groaned.

There was a rush of air as Dom shifted and jabbed himself against my side. I felt his breath on my neck. “Em?” he asked, uncertainly.

I gazed into the gloomy darkness. It would mean taking my tampon out, and a complicated arrangement with sheets and towels. “I’m tired,” I said. He turned over and faced the wall. “Sorry Dom” I whispered. “Tomorrow, maybe.”

I waited until his breathing was slow and shallow, and hugged his skinny back.

Chapter Eleven

The rest of the week, Dominic was out most nights, rehearsing. I spent a lot of time thinking about Tina. I wondered if I'd ever know for certain what had happened to her the night she vanished and what it was that had finally made her decide that life wasn't worth living anymore. On Saturday evening, when I arrived back from the supermarket, the flat was in darkness again. I turned on a few lights to cheer the place up, made myself a cup of tea, then walked into the bedroom where I sat on the floor and groped under the bed for the old suitcase handle.

This was the closest I could get to Tina now: yellowing newspaper articles, a thick wodge of teen magazines, promotional CDs, LPs and cassettes. A gold disc in a picture frame on red velour. A small, rough sculpture of a reclining figure made of what looked like aluminium and which I remembered from her art school days.

I leafed through the crumbling cuttings. The first, great reviews: *Exquisite Tina Petty* raved one journalist. *Goldilocks on speed*. A grainy photograph of Tina at the launch of a new West-End restaurant (long-since re-opened under another name) with John looking suave in a tux. There was an interview with Tina in *Stacey Teen-zine*. *Personal file: Hair – ice blonde. Eyes – cerulean blue. Ambition – to be delectably happy*. The awful reviews for her last-but-one album: *Kingdom of Dreams ... or should that be Nightmares? Sex-Kitten's early purring turns to angsty caterwauling. Yuk!* A report about the time she presented the prizes at a music-publishers' Christmas dinner. I remembered how upset Tina had been that she hadn't won anything. The article outlined how, as she was about to hand one of the bronze treble-clefs to a meteoric, blonde greyhound, Tina had turned to the mic and spewed out a torrent of abuse. The girl had been led away in tears and Tina had been bundled hastily off-stage.

There was a press release from Phil Jacobs, dated a couple of days after her disappearance said he was concerned for her safety and welfare, and stressed that no pressure would be put on her to return if she didn't want to. He appealed to anyone who knew of Tina's whereabouts to contact the police.

Then there were all the headlines. *Tina Petty's Car Found*. "Suicide a sad likelihood" says *Detective Ray Marsden*. Adjacent, a pensioner grinned out of the yellowing page: *Lucky Edna scoops jackpot*. The rest of the article had been cropped.

There was eulogy from Phil Jacobs, in a September '85 issue of *MMM*, in which he invoked all rival record companies to pool funds towards a memorial statue. In the end, he personally funded a small bronze plaque, which was embedded in the wall of his studio. There were salacious exposés by people who were supposed to have been her friends, which I'd always dismissed as publicity-seeking lies. Maybe they weren't, after all. The most outrageous of these articles was a double page spread in the *Sunday Fun* with a picture of Alan Gunter, Tina's bass player, wearing a bra and a lampshade, under the headline *Raunchy nights of drugs and sex*. I later discovered the picture had been stage-managed by the *Fun* in a hotel bedroom after Tina's disappearance. *Insatiable - kinky - dirty telephone-tapes*. The closing sentence of the article announced the release date of Alan's new solo album. I'd never heard of it - it must have bombed, despite the free publicity.

There was an interview in *Skin* magazine, with Ricky Chesney, Tina's drummer. The article was entitled *Terminal Blonde – the brink of oblivion*. Ricky paid tribute to her hard work, her musical ability and her stage presence. He talked of high hopes, breaks, late nights, one-off thrills becoming full-time necessities. Tina was so tired, he said, that *it got so she'd need something to get her going before a gig and then something to wind her down afterwards*. No mention was made of anything but a professional relationship.

Finally, I picked up the framed photograph of Tina's mother. She was pretty and distant and was standing with a man who looked like a B-movie actor. I never discovered who he was. I wondered if, under the right light, Tina's fingerprints would still show up on the glass.

"I've already told you." Tina is standing in front of the mirror.

"Tell me again." I'm three and three-quarters. I love hearing the same stories over and over again.

She sighs. "I'm your half-sister. Your Daddy is my Daddy, but Agi is not my Mummy. My Mummy's name was Eveline." Tina has just come back from the hairdresser. She looks really pretty. She is rubbing some pink stuff onto her cheeks.

"Please can I have a go?" I ask.

Tina eyes me in the mirror. "This'll turn you into a genuine princess."

"I don't want to be a princess."

"Of course you do." She turns round and hands me the small round compact. "You only need a little bit."

I press my forefinger into the pink grease and smear rub my cheek in a circle. I look like a clown. "Why don't you live with your mummy?" I ask.

Tina opens her eyes wide in front of the mirror as she puts on mascara. I stand next to her and try to make the same face. Tina blows herself a kiss. So do I. "Because my Mummy ran off."

My last rabbit ran off, too. I found her under next door's hedge. There were maggots in her tummy and Mr Peabody told me to go indoors while he took her away. "Where did your Mummy go?"

Tina pulls me down onto the bed next to her. "Promise you won't tell anyone?"

I love secrets. "Cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die times five million" I whisper.

"She ran away with her boyfriend."

"Why did they run away? Did they do something wrong?"

Tina wrinkles her forehead and thinks for a minute.

Agi is clumping heavily up the stairs. "Csillagom?"

"Quick," says Tina, shoving a pillow over my head. "Let's hide from the old witch."

Tina was eight when her mother took the overdose. The neatly written note Eveline left, blamed my father's infidelity for everything. She had a history of mental illness. I'd read somewhere that depression was hereditary. I'd read somewhere else that it wasn't.

My tea was stone-cold by the time I'd finished sifting. I replaced everything in the suitcase and shoved it back under the bed. I felt disappointed, though I didn't really know what I had been hoping to find. I remembered films in which answers, staring someone in the face for years, suddenly became as clear as day. I had no such revelation. *Promiscuous*, Dawn had said. And Francesca: *every couple has its ups and downs. They were no exception*. I felt disorientated, and rather naive. All this time, I'd been secure in the certainty that I'd known my sister better than anyone else in the world and had clung to my memory of her like a jewel.

I thought the scenarios I'd manufactured in order to ease the mystery of her disappearance: carefree Tina, scuba-diving off the Barrier Reef; enlightened Tina, sitting serene in the lotus position before a huge gold idol; domestic Tina, kneading wholemeal-dough in a *Provençale* farmhouse.

I shivered, turned the gas fire on and sat on the floor in front of it. Under the chair was a cup. I picked it up and pulled a face as I saw the film of mould covering the re-

hydrated vegetable remains of one of Dominic's instant soups. God knows how long it had been there. In the distance, a siren wailed.

I thought of the time before Tina went. Sunny days, when everything had been new, when I could hardly wait to get out of bed in the mornings and see what life had in store. For years I'd thought I was over the loss of her, but the truth was, I missed her terribly. I'd always assumed the police had found out everything possible about her disappearance. Maybe they hadn't. Maybe there was something I could do. For Tina. For me. I fetched my address book.

Chapter Twelve

Jade Palace Take-Away. Sunday Eat-As-Muc[sic]-As-You-Can £12.95

Scribbled on the reverse:

Phil Jacobs – ~~Tuesday~~ Wednesday 10th Nov, 2.15-2.25(?).

Ring to confirm (PA = Esme? Renie?).

Dominic, buy bog-roll!!!!

Alan Gunter – Thursday 1pm.

Soundright Studios.

Angel Tube. 100 yards on left. Down alleyway opposite Chick'n-Lick'n – not blue door.

Third buzzer.

<i>O</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>O</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>X</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>X</i>

Ricky & Susan Chesney. Cranefield Sports Centre. Thursday pm - Karate in main gym.

Causley Ave – R @ lights – L aft 2nd zeb xing – over rdbt – cpk on L.

Chapter Thirteen

I was early for once. I bought a samosa from a formica-and-glass sandwich bar and settled on a bench to eat it. Opposite, a lad in a sleeping bag gulped from a can of *Special Brew*. Pigeons rifled through waste bins. Bike-couriers rifled through dispatch-bags. Someone was trying to cram a black saloon into the tiny gap next to a meter. From where I sat, I could see the offices of *Up Yours Records* - Philip Jacobs's Company. *In a house on or near this site, Austrian composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, worked from July-August 1765.*

Phil was loaded (the boy Done Good). His plush offices occupied the top two floors of a building overlooking Soho Square. His Company-name had become a byword for teeny-bands and TV spin-offs – *Mr Wibbly-Wobbly*, *The Snooks*, *Ronnie-Rotweiler*. I had recently discovered that *Calix Press* – soft-core calendars for rugby club changing-rooms and car mechanics' workshops – was also part of Phil's empire.

People who knew no better, had always assumed that Tina was rich too. Actually, as a teenager, I had also thought so. Not unreasonably. For two sunshine years in the early eighties, you couldn't turn on a radio without hearing one of her songs. It was a shock to discover when Tina disappeared, that she and John were thousands and thousands of pounds in debt. I later discovered that the lion's share of monies made on any record goes to the songwriters – a royalty is payable each time the record is played – in a nightclub, on radio or television. Tina never wrote a song in her life.

Phil was Tina's songwriter, Phil, her barrow-boy Svengali. It was Phil who had discovered her, singing with a folk-rock band in a Hammersmith pub and it was at Phil's instigation that Tina had ditched her hippy beads, her long, honey-blond hair, her clean, choir-boy voice. He meticulously refashioned Tina into a sulky, brattish hell-raiser. Leather and ripped jeans. Flashes of lacey knicker. It was Phil's idea that she should affect a lisp. *Thith ith the real me and anybody who doethn't like it can jutht pith off.*

Phil touted his new, Rock-Venus around record companies and negotiated an (in those days) astonishing quarter of a million advance. The money soon went. What was left after covering recording costs Tina blew on her two habits: cocaine and writing off cars. The Music Industry may have gossiped of Tina's exploitation by an unscrupulous manager, but in truth she had agreed the deal and Phil had done nothing illegal. Certainly, Tina had always seemed to hold Phil in high esteem. I knew they'd been close.

I looked at my watch. Five to. I stood up, brushed the crumbs off my jacket and crossed the street. The security guard nodded as I pressed the button on the lift.

Dominic would, undoubtedly, have noticed and commented on the girl sitting behind her PC. “Emma Petty?” She eyed me with unabashed curiosity. I was used to this. I was also aware that I was something of a disappointment. I looked nothing like my sister. The girl stood up. “I’m Esme, Phil’s PA. He won’t be long,” she said.

I smiled and shook her hand. Phil’s door was ajar. His office afforded a good view of the London skyline. He rocked back and forth in his pneumatically-operated leather chair, ruddy-cheeked and a bit fat. I could half-imagine him in a sweep’s costume, bursting into a musical number. “I don’t care if they’re made of dog shit and polythene” he was yelling into a telephone. “They’re Designer. Thirty-five quid each.” He lowered his voice. “Sorry, angel, didn’t mean to shout.” Phil drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Headache, petal? Have you taken anything?” There was a pause while the other party spoke and then Phil said “good girl, you get some rest. I’ll be home before you can say kiss-me-quick. Got a little something for you.” He chortled, dirtily. “You’ll just have to wait and see.” He blew a smacker into the receiver, before replacing it on its Rococo cradle. “Esme” he boomed; “send her in.”

“Phil’s free now.” Esme smiled at me.

The carpet was off-white. One spilt coffee and it would need replacing. I inadvertently booted a thigh-high pile of unsolicited demos, which slid noisily to the floor. “Whoops, shit. I mean sorry.”

Phil seemed unperturbed. “Oi, Esme,” he called. “Get this crap out of my office.”

“Shall I return them?” she asked.

“Just bin ‘em.”

I hadn’t been in touch with Phil until earlier that year when I had sent him one of Dominic’s demos. I was surprised by how conscientiously he had dealt with it. I got a polite note, on *Up Yours* headed paper, obviously calculated to be showable to Dominic. ... *some really nice sounds - not our kind of thing at Up Yours, I’m afraid, but you could try*: and then there followed a list of five or six suggestions as to where Dominic might turn next. None of the companies ever replied, but Dominic clung to Phil’s letter like a lifebelt for months.

“So,” Phil said once I’d sat down. “What do you want this time? A job?”

I felt the fraying elbows of my sweater. “I’ve got one, Phil,” I said, “believe it or not.”

Phil's signet ring flashed as he waved in dismay. "Oh, gawd, not another demo. Alright, put it on – you've got five minutes. Esme, get me an aspirin."

"It's not a demo," I said quickly. "I'm trying to find out a bit more about Tina."

"It's okay, Esme; forget the aspirin," he yelled, and then to me, "what's all this in aid of?"

I'd already asked myself that. "I don't really know," I said, at last. "I suppose I just miss her, that's all."

"What do you want to know?"

"Not sure. A few answers, maybe."

He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette. "There's not much I can tell you."

"I wish I understood why she did it."

"Your guess is as good as mine, love," said Phil. "She had everything going for her. A little star, that's what she was." He looked distant. Phil was one of those people who always made you feel you were keeping him from something.

I looked over at the Georgian video cabinet. There was a boxed set of titles, launched last year for the adult market. *Raw* was Phil's brainchild. It was the generic name given to a new music-video concept, featuring desperate has-beens playing their ex-hits *au naturel*. They retailed at fifteen quid a copy, and kept selling.

Phil pushed himself back in his chair. "Okay, Patch" he said simply. "Let's cut to the chase. How much?"

"Sorry?"

"You don't have to give me details if you don't want, just tell me how much you need."

"I don't need anything."

"Relax, it happens to the best of us." He smiled like an uncle. "Now, what'll it be? A grand? Two?"

"No, really."

"Oh, come on. I can tell something's wrong. Five thousand? Tina's kid sister'll do alright by old Phil."

"I don't need money. I just want to know more. About Tina. You knew her longer than anyone."

Phil rested his hands behind his head. "Fire away then. I'll tell you what I know."

"She and John weren't happy together, were they?" The question sounded pale and pathetic.

Phil puffed his cheeks for a moment. "Not really."

"That argument they had – that last one when you were staying there," I started. Phil nodded. "Do you know what it was about?"

The phone started ringing. "Oi, Esme," yelled Phil. "Get that will you?" He turned back to me. "No, love. Sorry, I don't."

"Was there anyone else involved?"

"No one in particular. Sure, Tina messed about a bit, but that went with the territory." He was right, of course. I'd seen a thousand late-night Documentaries, featuring declining idols, defiantly relaxed about their promiscuity. *Hey, man, everyone was at it.* "John was the only one she really loved" he went on. "There was a bit of larking about with Ricky, on and off," (so Dawn had been right) "but that didn't mean anything. I think she did it more to get at Sue."

I remembered Dawn's description of John crying on Francesca's shoulder. "Did John know?"

Phil shrugged. "I s'pose so."

I thought of the article in the *Sunday Fun*. "And Alan?"

"Fat bastard." I looked at Phil, bulging in his swivel chair and must have smiled.

"Well, he is. Have you seen him?" There was something of the schoolboy about Phil. "He's huge. Gunter fancied that pants off Tina. Of course, she wouldn't have crossed the road to piss on him if he was on fire."

"Anyone else?"

"Not that I remember." He smiled. "No one important."

"Phil?" Esme was standing at the door. "Your cab's here."

"Thanks, love. Five minutes." Phil suddenly turned back into his hard-boiled, roly-poly self. "Off to my gaff in Spain. Little slice of paradise." He mentioned a remote, exclusive retreat in the hills between Malaga and Granada which I recognised from a recent television documentary as being home to bank-robbers, fraudsters, petty crooks made good. A place where no one asked any questions and everyone had something to hide. I imagined Phil's 'little slice of paradise'. A glistening villa, carved into a mountainside; the swimming pool an intensely blue teardrop. A dusky señorita in heart-shaped sunglasses...

“Have to let you go now, love. Best of luck.” He stood up. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.

Chapter Fourteen

I twisted my head cautiously around the open door to the studio. A television screen, perched above the console, flickered. Music started.

We're fruity in a fizzy sort of way.

Four wicked new flavours

No added sugar, either, so Mum'll love us!

We're tropitastic –

The tape stopped and for a moment the screen went still. The time code whizzed retrospectively. Calypso-singing pineapples rollerbladed backwards. An engineer, crouching in the corner of the room, pressed the button again.

"Alan?" I asked.

"Emma," munched a man on some French bread, spraying what smelled like Camembert down his poncho. He hauled himself up and squeezed between the console and the chair. It was only when I looked into his basset-hound eyes that I recognised him as the man in the lampshade and bra. He was now so colossal, he looked deformed. "It's been ages," he said, and introduced the engineer as Liam. "Tina Petty's sister" he said of me proudly. Alan moved an empty plate off a swivel chair and brushed aside crumbs of cheese and baguette. "Sit down."

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"*Fashion-Fruities*" said Alan. "New campaign." He picked up a bottle of naturally-carbonated Highland mineral water and swigged. Water dribbled down his chin. "Personally, I never eat that stuff. Too many E numbers." The mineral-water bottle swirled with crumbs, like a Christmas snow-scene. Alan poured me a coffee and passed the fruit bowl. "Grape?" They hadn't been washed and felt fuzzy on my teeth. "The ad looks nice, though" he said. "Liam, run it again."

Liam pressed a few buttons. Red-lipped kiwi fruits were being chased by a bunch of nympholeptic coconuts. The roller-blading pineapples provided the backing vocals.

Alan picked up a banana (I half expected it to burst into a calypso) and started peeling. After a gargantuan bite, he launched into a diatribe about pitiful budgets, requirements that changed never-endingly, Art Directors who didn't know their Bach from their Bebop. "If I've ever done anything just for the money, it's this. Still," he went on, "it's better than peddling that soft-porn crap Philip bloody Jacobs churns out."

I intercepted before Alan could go further. "Phil sends his regards" I lied, unable to think of anything better.

"Oh, you're in touch." Alan coloured.

These days, Alan wrote moody guitar-and-sax scores for urban dramas – the sort featuring long shots of gasometers, burning mattresses and Geordie back-streets. The flimsy dialogue always gave him plenty of scope for his languid melodies, one or two of which had had lyrics sprayed on and reached the charts. In his way he was doing alright – not Phil's great-train-robber millions, but a comfortable living, nonetheless.

Alan had started on the tangerines. His fingers hacked at the rind, juice bursting all over his track-sheet. He didn't seem to care and wolfed the peeled fruit whole. He said nasally, "I'm starving." Liam automatically pulled a sheaf of menus from a drawer. "I'm fed up with fast food," Alan said. "Fancy Italian?"

I realised he was talking to me. "That'd be nice."

"Liam, we're popping out for an hour or so."

"Right" said Liam, resentfully replacing the menus.

Casa Toscana was typical. Forests of Chianti-bottles lined the walls and piped disco-Puccini underscored the yelling waiters. *Doppio nero, Marco... Gelati senza panne...*

I ordered modestly. Alan, on the other hand, adopted a business-lunch approach – all three courses plus wine. Two gigantic mozzarella salads arrived. He was obviously a regular. "So," munched Alan "you're in with Phil." He leered, his mouth still busy.

"Just friends." I was beginning to regret having accepted Alan's invitation.

"I'm surprised you manage to keep up with him. He's got some pile in Spain, hasn't he?"

I nodded.

"Worth a bloody fortune, I expect." I didn't know whether he meant Phil or the villa. "I keep hearing *A Taste of Heaven* on that advert" Alan continued. "Slim-line yoghurt, isn't it?"

"Rice-pudding" I corrected, a little embarrassed to have remembered.

"I gave him the middle-eight for that song, you know. Never saw a penny, of course." He mopped olive-oil greedily from his plate with a piece of *ciabatta*. "My lawyer doesn't reckon it's actionable; Phil's word against mine. Too bad; think of the royalties."

I said nothing.

After a little while, Alan continued. "I wrote a couple of nice love songs for your sister. Classier than Phil's old tat. He wouldn't let her do them." A shred of basil had stuck to one of Alan's front teeth. "Said they weren't commercial enough, but of course he was just jealous. Wanted to keep the publishing all to himself. Phil never really wrote a decent bar in his life. Tina's songs were all team efforts. Just listen to my bassline on *Tell-Tale Heart* and tell me it's not that that makes it." It was true. Alan's playing had been sampled and recycled on a thousand subsequent hits by other artists. "Nothing I could do. Any complaints and I'd have been out on my arse. I needed the money. Hey, Luigi!"

"Si Signor." A stripey waiter leapt to attention. I recognised him from music-college.

"Hi, Wayne!" I said.

"Oh, hi Emma" Wayne replied. His Luigi-accent suddenly lapsed into broad Bermondsey. "Still tickling the ivories?" Wayne had played the bassoon.

Alan looked irritated. "Where the hell's my escallop? I've been waiting ages."

"Just a tick." Wayne scuttled off to the kitchens.

There was a pause. "You know, Emma," Alan said, "depression's a terrible thing." He tipped the crumbs from the empty bread-basket into his palm and picked them off with his tongue. "It destroys people. The only thing that surprised me about your sister was that she stayed with that two-bit actor. Oi!" he yelled at another passing gondolier, "can we have a bit of service here?" He turned back to me. "Compared to Tina, he was nothing. Out of work most of the time. Skint." Alan sighed. "She could have had anyone. Why him?"

Wayne arrived with two overloaded plates. This time he didn't bother sounding Mediterranean. "Enjoy your meal."

"I bloody better" Alan snarled. "Taken long enough."

I could think of absolutely nothing more to say. We ate in silence.

"She wanted kids, you know." Alan's remark came from nowhere. "I expect you know she'd had problems."

I was astonished. "What do you mean?"

"Oh God, I hope I haven't spoken out of turn."

Alan froze with his mouth full. My shock must have been evident. "No, go on" I reassured him.

"She had a miscarriage. I reckon lover-boy was giving her a hard time over it."

"John?"

“Yeah. Bastard.” Alan was already gesticulating at a woman wheeling a sweet-trolley. “Over here, love.”

Chapter Fifteen

Cranefield Avenue. The *Jade Palace* menu was jammed between my fingers and the brake lever. I pedalled up to the junction and stopped in the middle of the road. Some twat with airbrushed flames over his wheel-arches tore past, nearly taking me with him. Once I'd recovered, I made an outraged circle with my thumb and forefinger and waggled it up and down, but by that time, the pump and throb of his boom-box was already blending into the general south London hum. Smells of cardamon and cumin were wafting across the damp pavements from the *Garden of India*. For the most part, it was evening traffic fumes.

I turned into the cherry-lined street I must have passed a hundred times before. The Sports Centre was a big eighties building at the end of their busy road. It already looked dated: glass and blue-glossed metal, uplit by halogen lamps angled in the municipal shrubbery.

I chained my bike to the railings and walked into the foyer. *Tumbletots. Fatbusters. Circuits and weights.* I could hear a woman yelling hearty commands over a ghetto-blaster.

"And push-two-three, and thrust-two-three." Yuk.

Karate, Susan had said. I peered through the glass porthole in the door next to the ticket office. Ricky was wearing a white suit, knotted at the waist with a brown belt. He was a little thicker-set, maybe, but not, at this distance at any rate, perceptibly changed. The line of kneeling under-tens had their backs to me. Some had the right gear, but there were a few grubby pink tracksuits and replica strips too. Coloured belts - white, red, orange. The kids' heads were bowed. There was complete silence. I counted thirty bare, upturned feet.

I snuck in. Ricky barked something foreign. The kids stood up, bowed and then complete pandemonium broke out. They raced past me, whooping and shrieking. An angelic-looking boy rugby-tackled a white-belt and threw her plastic pony at a basket-ball net. It got stuck. A crewcut slid across the wooden floor on his knees, whizzing a belt over his head and making helicopter noises. A fat little girl did handstands. Her tunic hung over her face. She seemed quite untroubled by the exposure of her chubby midriff.

"Hurry up, you lot" shouted Ricky over the general din. "The badminton people are waiting." I noticed three old ladies hovering nervously behind me, clutching their rackets.

An assortment of adults had started gossiping. ... *Have you seen Death Ninja?* ...

I smiled at Ricky.

“Emma?” A woman, with a ying-yang sign emblazoned across her ample bosom, approached me. She smiled tentatively. “Emma? It is, isn’t it?”

I held out my hand. “Great to see you again, Sue.”

Ricky ambled over, and gave me a sweaty bear hug. “Fuckin’ right,” he said. His language didn’t provoke a second glance from any of the kids. He released me and stood back. “Well,” he said. “Look at you. All grown up. Bloody hell.” A lad with a grubby face skidded across the floor and rammed his head into Ricky’s gut. “Oi” said Ricky. “Get out of it.” The boy laughed. “This is my Eric.” Ricky ruffled the boy’s mousy hair.

“Hi, Eric” I said.

“Hello” he said, uninterestedly, and raced back to where a young lad was being tied to the wall-bars.

“Eric’s ten” said Susan. “And Jimmy’s eight. That’s Jimmy, over there. Get down, Jimmy - you’ll break your neck.” Both boys had Ricky’s lopsided smile. Ricky caught Jimmy’s eye and made a monkey face at him. Susan tutted “don’t encourage them, Rick,” and turned to me. “Fancy a drink? I’m gasping.”

We sat in the bar. Ten square feet had been ludicrously themed to look Irish. Through the partition we could see into the foyer, where Eric and Jimmy were wrestling with the fat little girl. A plastic standful of flyers crashed to the ground.

“Oi, you two” Ricky snarled, but no-one seemed to pay much attention as the glossy leaflets got kicked about. *Aquarobics. Babe-o-thon. Bungee-mania.* Ricky took a slug of beer. “I’m knackered,” he said.

Sue peeled cellophane from a packet of super-kingsize cigarettes and lit one.

“Do you do this every week?” I asked Ricky.

Ricky licked the foam from his upper lip. “The instructor got stuffed in a competition,” he said. “I’m standing in until his eye goes down. The kids do my head in.”

“Rick’s always covered in bruises,” said Sue, puffing smoke over her shoulder, and doing a quick check on the boys. “I’m surprised anyone dares get into his cab.”

“You’re a cabbie?”

“Don’t knock it.” Ricky grinned. “It pays.”

“He’s a terrible driver,” said Sue. “Don’t know how he passed *the knowledge*.”

“Piss off.”

“Someone actually complained to the Company.”

“Bloody cyclists,” said Ricky, raising his chin to tip more beer in.

“What do you mean, ‘bloody cyclists’?” I said. “At least we’re not burning a hole in the ozone layer.”

“No road-sense” said Ricky. He had a bead of froth on his cheek.

“Hark who’s talking” said Sue.

“What do you do?” I asked her.

“She does the markets,” said Ricky.

“Stop it, Ricky” she said. “He always says that. It makes people think I’m in stocks and shares. I’ve got a stall, down at *The Mills*. Aromatherapy oils. Tarot cards. I do astrological charts.”

Dominic and I had gone down to *The Mills* for my last birthday. He’d spent practically the entire afternoon at the second-hand record shop, flicking through the old vinyl.

“And you?”

“Mum, I’m bored. Can I have some money for the machines? Eric’s head was halfway around the glass door. Sue reached into her purse and tipped out a couple of pound coins. “And Jimmy, too.” She handed him another quid. The door slammed behind him as he sprinted noisily across the foyer towards a fibre-glass Spaceship.

“Part-time Music lecturer. I give piano lessons as well.”

Ricky looked impressed. “A proper musician - unlike us lot.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Sue. “I got grade six guitar.”

“God knows how.”

“Your sister played the flute,” said Sue.

There was a pause.

Sue hazarded “you said you wanted to talk to us about her.”

I reached for my cigarettes. “I suppose, when she went, I was too young to understand why she did it.” Sue nodded sympathetically. There was a battered poster behind the bar. A picture of a motorbike. Palm trees. A Tina-lookalike in a white bikini, seductively holding out a pair of men’s swimming-trunks. *Rum* the advert said. *Aren’t you missing something?* “Don’t know where to begin, really.”

I tapped my jacket for a lighter. Ricky picked his off the table and cupped the flame behind his hand. He smelled a bit of onions. “Boys, will you cut that out?” he yelled.

Sue turned to me. “Tina and I weren’t close – as I expect you know.” She twisted her silver rings thoughtfully. “But I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her in the end. She was all over the place. You don’t mind me talking like this, do you?”

"I need to know" I reassured her.

"Tina was a Scorpio. I could never relate to them. What are you?"

"Cancer." I thought of Francesca.

"The homemaker," mused Sue. "That's nice."

"Mum, I want some crisps."

"Tina didn't like me and Sue getting it together." Ricky said.

"Typical Scorpio" said Sue. "Possessive. Jealous."

"Mum, tell him." Jimmy's wide eyes peered through the glass. "He's nicked all the money and won't let me have a go."

"Calm down." Sue fiddled in her purse for another quid.

"Tell Eric if he doesn't let you, I'll want my money back."

"Now piss off" Ricky added.

"Ricky!"

Jimmy disappeared again.

"Jimmy's a Pisces," said Sue, apologetically. "Very touchy." She looked thoughtful.

"I think the first time I noticed she was having problems was around the time we released *Don't Talk to Me*. Remember, Ricky? There was that interview she gave for *Kick Magazine*. The journalist had seemed very nice. It was a real knock." *Tina Wannabe!* the headline read. I still had the yellowing cutting in the suitcase under my bed. It had hurt her in a way that I wouldn't have believed possible. "John had landed a television thing," Sue continued. "Spent weeks on location. Tina went nuts when she couldn't contact him. She took a load of cocaine and started throwing stuff around the hotel-room. She nearly got us chucked out."

"All of us were on the sniff," Ricky continued "but Tina didn't know when to stop."

The air was acrid with cigarette fumes. There was a wail from a small child in the corner.

... *Jolene, I said give her the bunny blanket* ...

Ricky smiled. "Don't touch the stuff these days. Not since Sue had the kids. I kept telling Tina to lay off it, especially after she fucked her sinuses, but she wouldn't. Daft cow." He suddenly looked furious and banged on the window. "Eric, stop chucking them about."

Sue continued. "In the end, she was getting really spooked. Paranoid. Always thought people were laughing at her. They really were in the end. She'd left the real world." A wiry man with tattoos put money into a slot-machine. *Alien Invader*. There was cosmic burbling and a spacey voice said *welcome to Planet Zulan*.

Ricky drained his glass and pushed it across the table. "It was her bloke I felt sorry for. Fancy another?"

"I don't know how John put up with it," said Sue. She reached into her bag for her purse and stood up. "My round."

As Sue walked over to the bar, Ricky continued, "Tina treated him like shit. Always ringing him. Before a session, after a session. Giving him a hard time. Shouting and screaming. What he'd been doing – who he'd been seeing – that kind of stuff. Seemed like he couldn't even take a piss without her wanting to know about it. Sue's brother's a lighting designer. Told us how Tina would turn up at rehearsals, creating stink. After a while, it became a bit of a joke in the business. People thought twice about hiring John. Too much of a liability."

Had Tina had been responsible for the decline in John's career? That was a shock. I'd always known Tina to be insecure, but the behaviour Ricky and Sue described sounded pathological. I began to regret wanting to know more about Tina. I didn't like what I was finding out. "She wasn't faithful to John," I said.

Ricky fiddled with his beer mat. "About the time of the *Thin Air* tour, she started going around telling everyone that she and John had an open relationship. Said she didn't want to feel tied down, and that he understood. Only found out later that John didn't know anything about it. There was a huge ruckus. Couple of months later, John started seeing this bird in Bayswater. Reckon he did it to get back at her. A magazine printed a photograph of them together. Tina went ballistic."

"But why?" I frowned. "That's a complete case of double standards."

Ricky shrugged. "Typical Tina. Wanted to have her cake and eat it. Afterwards, they tried to get it together again, on a more normal footing, but by that time, Tina was a real mess."

"Do you know who John was seeing?" I wrapped my feet around the legs of the stool and stared at him.

Ricky frowned then shook his head. "An actress. Don't remember her name. No one famous."

"And Tina?"

He stubbed his cigarette out. "Wouldn't know where to start. One nighters, mostly."

Sue was still standing at the bar, out of earshot. I lowered my voice. "I heard that you and Tina ..." I trailed off, not knowing exactly how to phrase the question.

Ricky looked a little surprised but he answered. He nodded. "Yeah. Off and on."

"Was it serious?"

He laughed. "God, no. Just a bit of a lark, really." He nodded over at Sue who was handing a crumpled bank-note to the bartender. "I was a prat. Poor old Sue put up with a lot of shit from me in those days. Bloody miracle she stuck by me. Glad she did. Hey - don't suppose Phil told you about him and Tina?"

"What?" Now that was a revelation. Wide-boy, Phil Jacobs? *Nice bloke*, Tina had said of him once to me, *but completely unshaggable*.

"Yeah," said Ricky. "Phil and Tina knocked about together long before she met John."

I'd had no idea. Tina had always been physically affectionate towards Phil, but in my naivety I had assumed that her behaviour denoted nothing more than close friendship. Actually, I'd always thought Tina considered Phil a sort of father-figure.

Sue returned, balancing three pints and clutching two packets of crisps under her arm. The tiny mirrors on her skirt flashed as she crossed her legs. "Do you remember that party in Munich?" she said to Ricky. "God, it was awful. John was chatting to the PR girl – what was her name?"

"Liesel. Diesel Liesel."

"Tina threw a complete wobbler. She chucked this bowl of soup-stuff at them and called her a whore. There was an almighty row."

In the car park below an alarm went off. I looked out at the flashing lights. Nobody in the bar took the blindest bit of notice. Jimmy had nodded off in a beer-stained armchair, sucking his thumb.

Ricky was silent for a moment, before saying, "I know it doesn't sound like it, but I really liked your sister. She was a great laugh in the early days. Before it all started going pear-shaped."

"Fantastic stage-presence," conceded Sue.

"I was sorry, you know. About what happened." Ricky looked at his watch and drained his glass. "Got a Gatwick run first thing tomorrow. M25. Murder."

Eric breathed on the window and played hangman in the mist.

"Eric, Don't lick the glass. It's filthy."

I looked through the wire-meshed doors, past the *Lost and Found* notices, to the police appeal with a photofit picture. There was a menacing sneer on the suspect's twisted lips: *Assault. Did you see anything?*

And underneath: *Self-defence for Beginners. Mondays and Thursdays 7pm.*

PART FOUR

Wednesday 19th June 1985

Tina's tour's been cancelled. Not enough tickets sold. Tina spouted some crap about it being John's fault. He told her to piss off and chucked a chair over. Heavy HEAVY scene. Tina shouted that no one would give a fuck if she was alive or dead. Then she said she was tired, and went back to bed. John's not himself. He doesn't seem to like Tina much at the moment. Still, she does ask for it, sometimes.

John took me to meet Francesca. He told her I'd been kicked out of school. He put a tea-towel on his head and pretended to be a nun. Francesca nearly pissed herself. Her house is really old. She says she's never seen a ghost. Her husband's called Freddie. He's got something wrong with him. He can't walk and he dribbles. Francesca keeps telling him to calm down. She showed me how to play croquet. I said I thought the game was a bit stupid. She agreed and said so were most of the people who played it. Francesca asked me if I'd go and see her again, sometime. I said I would. It must be really shit for her, cooped up all day with Freddie.

This afternoon, I walked down to the fairground. Kev was there, touching up(?) his motorbike. He gave me a ride. No crash helmets. I nearly shat myself. Went up into the woods. Fucking lethal. We stopped at Grimes Pots. Found this trapdoor, with a padlock on it. Stringer picked the lock. A big, black hole like a cave. The walls were dripping and it was all echoey. Luuuuurvely and cool. Stringer had a can of spray paint in his pocket and sprayed Alloyhead on the walls. Some fucked-up group he likes. I wrote my name and the date. Bit boring. Sprayed a skull and crossbones underneath. Kev rolled a joint. He's got some gear called Superskunk. Really strong. Snogged for ages. I let him put his hand up my T-shirt. Didn't let him go under my bra. It was really late when I got back. John was waiting up. I thought he was going to give me another lecture, but he didn't. He was really nice. He and Tina seem to have made it up, thank God.

Chapter Sixteen

The last train to Redwater left at seven-thirty. I had fifteen minutes to pack. I flung clothes into my rucksack while changing.

The telephone rang. Oh, God - not now. I lunged for the portable on the bedside cabinet and tugged up the aerial. "Hello?"

"May I speak with Emma Petty?" asked a friendly woman's voice. Bit sloaney.

"Speaking." Socks. Knickers. A pair of Dom's boxers. I flicked them aside.

"Annabel Lacey here. I'm a chum of Alan Gunter's."

"Oh, hi." Jeans. Shit. In the wash. I'd have to use the emergency pair with the fucked zip. Then I had a brainwave. I nicked a pair of Dominic's. He would be absolutely furious, but then I would be some two hundred miles away. Other than pace about crossly (which I wouldn't see anyway), what could he do?

"I hope you don't mind my trying you at home like this," she said "but I had lunch with Alan today. He told me all about you." I moved suddenly and smashed my head on a ridiculous shelf Dom put above the bedside table. (Divine retribution for the jeans-theft.) My eyes were actually streaming with the pain. "He tells me you're trying to get to the bottom of Tina's disappearance." I rubbed the burgeoning lump on my cranium and forgot to answer. She went on "sorry, if this is a bad time..."

"No, it's okay. Just banged my head."

"God, are you alright? Put some ice on it."

"I'm fine."

"I was a big fan of your sister's. I saw her concerts all over the place." Her use of the word 'concert' sounded a bit uncool, but she was so enthusiastic I let her go on.

"*Clockhouse, The Whistle Stop, Castle Ford Festival*. I practically lived in her suitcase. Darling, the start of the *Thin Air* tour in eighty-three - now that was something - when she did that acoustic version of *Go Electric* ..." (Phil had managed, subsequently, to flog it to a Welsh power-supplier. *Energi Cymraeg*.)

"It's really nice you remember her."

"Remember her? That woman was unforgettable. Simply - well - a one off. The real McCoy." Even I would have been abashed to gush quite that profusely. I felt happy for Tina - wherever she may have been. "You must miss her terribly," said Annabel.

"I do."

“Darling, just awful – not being able to grieve properly. I really feel for what you’re trying to do. The world has got to acknowledge her genius.” Now I knew for sure she was a bit batty, but I liked her. She had, after all, phoned me just to be nice. “I’ve got a few bits and pieces you might like to see,” she continued, “press cuttings, mostly. I’ve got a fabulous *Thin Air* tour-jacket. Alan said you might be interested.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “That’d be fantastic.”

Then I panicked a bit in case she was expecting me to buy it or something – that would explain the gushiness. I was skint, but Annabel went on kindly, “it’d be an honour: *the* Tina Petty’s sister. Perhaps we could arrange to meet sometime?”

“Great.”

“I ought to chase up John Fairfax. Maybe he could join us.”

“Do you know him?”

“Know him? John and I go back forever. How is he these days?”

“Oh, fine. He doesn’t like to talk about Tina, though. You’ll have to stick to less touchy subjects.”

“I know Tina’s disappearance hit him hard. Poor man.”

“The whole thing really cut him up.”

“Of course it did. Stupid of me even to mention it, really.”

“He almost had a breakdown.”

“So I understand,” said Annabel. “Awful. Quite, quite awful. Still, he’s fighting fit now. That’s the main thing. I’ve been racking my brains over Tina.”

“Me too.”

“Have you a theory?”

I stuffed a pile of college marking into a plastic bag. “Not really. I mean, she was depressed, but I would never have thought her the type to do herself in. Oh God.” I’d caught sight of the time on the radio alarm. “Look, I’m really sorry,” I said, grabbing my jacket. Keys. Purse. “I’ve got to go. Train to catch. Are you around after the weekend? It would be great to chat.”

“Of course,” said Annabel. “I’ll call you.”

Chapter Seventeen

Francesca seemed, if that were possible, even thinner than she had been the previous week. When I arrived, I found her clutching the banisters on the stairs. I realised at once that things were bound to have deteriorated. Later in the utility room, she smashed a jar of preserved peaches all over the floor. Even her chirpy anecdoting as I cleaned up the mess was laced with a new type of frustration. She didn't argue when I insisted she go to bed immediately after supper.

I slept fitfully and woke early. At six, I showered. At seven, I took Emil on a walk. I stashed his doggy biscuits in case he decided to do another runner. We tramped through muddy fields, over the stile, then turned left by the gate into the woods. Emil bounded up and down, rolling in every shitty smell he could find. Every so often I bunged him a biscuit so he didn't stray too far, but the more he ate, the less effective was each successive bribe. Everything, apart from Emil, smelled wonderfully clear. As I walked, pheasants chattered and leaped for the cover of the rhododendrons. Overhead, a buzzard hovered. I stopped, sat on a tree-trunk and watched the rabbits, nibbling in the low mist over by the great outcrop of rocks in the field. The hum of distant traffic was as unobtrusive as the sound of the wind through the trees, or a far-off waterfall. Nevertheless it was there, largely indistinct, but occasionally swelled by a passing juggernaut. I wondered whether it was possible, any longer, entirely to escape from the sound of the city.

Emil spotted the rabbits and bounded over towards them, barking. Why did he always assume that everything wanted to be friends? The rabbits shot down their burrows, white tails flashing.

I lit a cigarette, and as I puffed, I thought of gushy Annabel. I ran through, again in my head, what I'd learned from my conversations with Phil, Alan, Ricky and Sue. I had hoped that talking to them about my sister might have laid some ghosts to rest. Instead, I found myself even more confused. Tina and Ricky. Tina and Phil. Tina and, it sounded like, a hundred and one others as well. Tina having a miscarriage? I never even knew she wanted kids. As for John giving her a hard time because of it – it seemed unlikely, but then I had been wrong about so many things. I supposed it might be true. As for Tina being instrumental in the decline of John's career ... I didn't recognise the person I knew in all this. I knew it would be tricky, but I really wanted to speak to John about it and find out his side of the story.

I found myself taking the track up towards *Woodside*. I remembered when they had bought the place – well, Tina had bought it really – her little piece of the countryside. “I know,” she had apparently squealed, as they first came upon the crumbling, Medieval hulk, “let’s do it up.” Everyone had been astonished when they realised Tina was serious. Tina’s subsequent and interminable moaning about the slowness of renovation, her constant needling of John as to his ‘laziness’ as she put it, regarding organising the workmen (“after all, who’s fucking paying for it?”) had been one of the most frequent catalysts of their ugliest rows. John had once precipitated a scene by calling her Marie-Antoinette. The whole incident occurred when, in order to lay a drain, he and a group of labourers from the village had started prising up the gigantic York stone slabs in the courtyard. Tina had been bugging about with cups of tea and chocolate biscuits. She’d even bought herself a pair of denim dungarees with flowery patches - to look the part, as she put it. She flung the entire tea tray to the ground, ripped the folksey headscarf from her head and told the lot of them to fuck off before tearing off in her pink convertible for her London flat. *Woodside* was finally habitable the spring of 1984. After Tina’s disappearance, John left it in the hands of letting agents. He continued to let it after Tina’s will had taken effect and *Woodside* was left to him absolutely. I wondered what had induced him to want to move back there now.

I stood at gate. Dared I? I crunched across the gravel and knocked.

John took some time to come to the door, and when he did, he was rubbing his eyes. Emil, who was delighted to see him, leaped and planted a muddy paw in John’s groin.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“No” he squinted. “What time is it?”

I looked at my watch. “Eight-thirty.” He grumbled. “Shall I come back later?” He was wearing a painty T-shirt, tracksuit bottoms and flip-flops. His hair was all over the place. He had black stubble on his chin. John was one of those people whom dishevelment suited, somehow.

Emil slid through the gap between John’s leg and the doorframe. John sighed and moved to one side. I shut the door. The place was in chaos. There was no carpet, just dustsheets, which partially covered the floorboards. Splashed on the plaster, between the beams were a number of painted squares. Terracottas. Burned Sienna. He’d obviously been trying out colours. I followed John through to what used to be the dining room. Some of the floorboards were up. Electric cables ran between the joists – some of them white and plasticky, others looking as though they dated back to Faraday’s earliest experiments. There

were huge cardboard boxes piled everywhere. *Techmatic washer-drier. Techmatic halogen-hob. Techmatic family-sized dishwasher (14 place-settings). Techmatic fan-assisted oven and extractor.* Emil flopped down in the middle of the filthy floor and closed his eyes.

“So this is going to be the kitchen?” I said.

John nodded. A kettle and a couple of cups were perched on a small occasional table. “Coffee?” he asked, flicking a switch.

I nodded. “Black.”

“I remember.” Through the window, I could see the swimming pool half full of rubble. What remained of the Mediterranean-blue tiles was smashed. Bacchus and Ariadne had been buried. “I think you might need to change the filter,” I said.

John looked out at the wreckage. “I suppose I could turn it into a rockery. How’s Francesca?”

“Bit wobbly last night. I left her to sleep in, this morning.” On the floor were scattered brochures and notes in John’s handwriting. I was surprised I still recognised it. John tipped some coffee-grounds into a cafetiere and poured the water on. His tee-shirt was torn right across the back. I gazed up at the ceiling so he wouldn’t think I was staring. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. “Strange, being back here again,” I said. John didn’t reply. I tried again. “I went to see Phil last week. And the others in the band.”

John frowned.

A bare light-bulb hung from the flex in the ceiling. The hand-blown, lalique lampshades were gone. I remembered Tina’s delight at finding them all those years ago in an up-to-the-minute Chelsea Emporium. I suddenly realised why John felt uncomfortable discussing the past with me; he had tried meticulously to excise all trace of Tina from his life.

“John?” A voice crooned from the landing. “Darling, are you on the telephone?”

“No.”

“I thought I heard you chattering. Be a poppet and call the plumber. There’s no hot water again.”

A delicate tripping down the stairs. The woman noticed me and hastily clutched her bathrobe together. “Oh, you didn’t say we had company.” She was blonde, though a neat, Knightsbridge honey-blond rather than Tina’s chemical white. Even in her bathrobe she somehow transformed the filth and rubble of the place into having the potential for a photo-shoot. She extended the hand which was not clutching the bathrobe. “Hello, I’m Elaine.

“Emma. I was just passing. Bye, guys; I’m out of here.”

“Oh, Emma Petty? I hope you’re all in one piece after your tussle with my car.”

Elaine’s car? Oh, fuck. No wonder John had thrown such a wobbler. She smiled in the way people do at parties when you tip wine on them and they tell you it doesn’t matter (you clumsy bastard). “God, I’m so sorry.”

“Nonsense” Elaine twittered. “John told me it was his fault. He always drives too fast.” She gave John a reproachful peck on the cheek. “Don’t you, darling? Thank goodness, you’ve made some coffee. I need something to defrost me after that awful shower. Emma, would you like some?” Elaine poured it into the two cups that were on the tea-tray.

I watched John rinse out a jam-jar, pour coffee into it and raise it to his lips. He must have seen me staring. “Bit short on mugs,” he smiled, ruefully.

“But darling, you’ve used that for turps.”

John slipped into broad Aberdeen “A wee dram to start the day.”

Emil started chewing noisily at his bollocks. That Elaine pretended not to notice didn’t surprise me, but that John did suddenly made me feel de trop. Elaine in her dressing gown, not enough cups, John doing impressions instead of calling the plumber. “Here, have this one” I offered, “I was just going anyway.”

“No hurry, Patch. Have a biscuit. Elaine, where are they?”

“As I remember, you finished them all – greedy.” She prodded John in the gut.

“Patch” she mused. “I once had a pony called Patch.”

I tried to remain friendly. “A childhood nickname.”

“That’s really sweet,” said Elaine kindly. “My old schoolchums still call me Loopy.” I felt my smile begin to fray. She went on. “We came across some photographs of you, didn’t we John?” She smiled. “All that spiky black hair – ”

“A teenage thing” John added understandingly. Now even he was beginning to piss me off.

“Don’t be so patronising, John. It was a valid teenage fashion statement,” said Elaine. “My sister Fiona went through a Punk phase too. Daddy nearly had a heart-attack.”

“Goth” I corrected.

“All looks the same to me” she laughed merrily.

I twisted my nose ring. “When will all this be finished?” I indicated the house.

“Patch – may I call you Patch?” I didn’t respond. “Please say that again; *louder*.” Elaine groaned theatrically. “We girls need our little luxuries.” She jabbed John in the arm with a pale-pink fingernail. “Don’t we, Patch?” I didn’t answer. “Of course,” she continued,

“it’ll be worth it in the end. The house has such potential. You should have seen it, Patch, when the tenants left. It was filthy. Still, it needed redecorating. That pine paneling in the bathroom.” She giggled. “So passé.” I remembered Tina choosing it, and how excited she had been as the carpenter had put it up. Elaine motioned around the four walls. “But having all this space will be heavenly. There’s barely room to think in our London flat.” She paused. “A fabulous place for children, don’t you think?”

“Elaine has her own gym,” said John from nowhere.

“Really?” I pictured more women called Elaine and Fiona sweating pornographically.

Elaine laughed. “It’s not a gym, it’s a fitness farm,” she corrected. “John tells me you’re a teacher” she continued, with schooled, over-earnest politeness. “What a worthwhile vocation.”

“Lecturer” I said, slightly indignant.

“I’ve just set up my third farm – *The Pantiles* – in Redwater. We’re holding a special introductory price promotion at the moment. It’s very popular.” I imagined Emil, now snoring on the floor, transformed, prancing about in a sweatband and leotard. “John’s on an intensive schedule.” What lay beneath John’s ripped T-shirt now seemed precious little more than an extension of Elaine. “Why don’t you come over sometime?” she breezed. “I could put you on a special resculpting programme.”

“Thanks,” I said, realising as I said it, how ungrateful I sounded.

“My pleasure.”

I felt tired and picked up Emil’s lead. My coffee stood untouched. “Nice to meet you.”

John followed me to the door. He seemed subdued. I looked up and studied his broken nose, his dark face, the stubborn line of his mouth. He felt a million miles distant, until he smiled. “I’ve got a new front wheel for your bike,” he said. “I can fit it next week.”

When I arrived back at *Fallowfield*, Francesca was sitting in the kitchen. There were a couple of pill bottles on the table. “You were up bright and breezy,” she said. “Dominic phoned.”

“Oh? Everything alright?”

“Just wanted to see how you were.”

I shrugged off my jacket. “Good sleep?”

“Pff” she said, waving her hand.

“Did the Doctor come?” Francesca nodded. I noticed a prescription next to her. “I’ll pick that up for you.”

She didn’t acknowledge my offer and I pocketed the illegibly filled out slip of paper. Emil slobbered her face. “That’s right, darling, give mummy a kiss and bugger off,” she said, scrunching his silky ears up over his head and rubbing her nose against his. “Patch, he reeks. Where on earth have you been?”

“John’s,” I said.

“Oh?”

I hung my coat up in the cupboard and kicked off my shoes.

Francesca was all ears. “How was he?”

“Alright.” I slumped down, exhausted. “Actually, I woke him up.

“Poor lad.”

“Served him right. He had this dumb blonde with him. Elaine,” I continued, aping her accent nastily.

“Now, now, Patch. Dear, sweet Elaine.” Francesca was twinkling naughtily.

“Stuck-up cow.” I stared into my coffee. “She wanted to put me on a re-sculpt programme. She can fuck off.”

Francesca laughed. “Do you know, I don’t think I’ve ever known you hate someone before, Patch. It’s rather fun.”

“I don’t hate anybody” I mumbled.

The telephone rang. It was Dominic. He sounded pleased to hear my voice. “Em, how’s it going?”

“Okay. Sorry I didn’t get back to you. I’ve been out.”

“Oh, right.”

“What have you been up to?” I asked, brightly. My forced chirpiness made the question sound weirdly obscene.

“Nothing much.” Silence. “Just wanted to hear your voice.”

I was suspicious. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He seemed blue. “I miss you.”

I was astonished.

“When will you be back?” he went on.

“Monday.”

“That long?”

“Why?”

“No reason. I just miss you, that’s all.”

“I miss you too,” I said. What worried me, was that I didn’t entirely mean it anymore.

Chapter Eighteen

“Why did you do that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think you wanted them.” Dawn was standing in the sitting room, next to the white ash of the fire. Her bottom lip was trembling and she was rather flushed.

“And why wouldn’t I want them?” Francesca looked furious.

Dawn stared at the ground and didn’t say anything for a moment. “I’m sorry” she repeated.

My flabbergasted gaze switched from one to the other. “What’s going on?” I asked.

Dawn unplugged the Hoover and pressed the button to reel up the flex.

“My seed catalogues” pronounced Francesca. “She’s thrown away my seed catalogues. I will not be cleared up after as though I were a party from the day before.”

“I’m sure Dawn didn’t do it on purpose,” I said, throwing her a sympathetic glance.

There was silence. Dust orbited in the sunlight that streamed through the window.

“I’m still here, in case you hadn’t noticed.” Francesca made a dash for the stairs. Her heels clicked unsteadily on the wooden treads. I heard a door bang.

Dawn shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said again as though it was some sort of mantra that she had been repeating all her life. “There was all this junk mail, and a load of gardening stuff for next year.”

It was thoughtless. Little things meant a lot to Francesca, now. Unfortunately she relied heavily on people like Dawn. “Don’t worry about it” I soothed. “Things get to her sometimes. It’s her illness that makes her irritable.” I hated my disingenuousness and the need for it.

“Oh” Dawn looked relieved. “As long as it isn’t me.”

“She’s always telling me how grateful she is to you.” I lied. “Please don’t let this upset you.”

“Of course I won’t” said Dawn, her features softening. “*To the counsellors of peace is joy* – Proverbs, 12:20. Do you think I should go up and -?”

“I’d leave it for a bit,” I said quickly. “Bung the kettle on. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Francesca was sitting at her Art Nouveau dressing table. She was mopping her eyes with a tissue pulled from the silver holder. I stood in the doorway. She caught my eye in the mirror. Francesca’s face, nestling in the lily-carved frame. She already looked like a photograph.

"If this is too much for you, I'll understand" said Francesca, quietly.

"Francesca – I –" I rubbed my forehead, and then exhaled loudly in exasperation.

"Oh no" I said. "I'm not going anywhere."

She stood up. Tears were spilling over her puffy cheeks. "I don't want you to see me like this" she said.

"Shh." I put my arms around her quickly and rested my chin on her shoulder. I clenched my jaw and swallowed.

"Is she okay?" asked Dawn, anxiously, after I had helped Francesca undress and get into bed.

What could I say? "She's going to have a sleep. Don't worry about upstairs. I'll do it later."

Dawn seemed pleased not to have to continue cleaning and shook her head sympathetically. "It's terrible, isn't it?" She clicked her tongue. "Seeing her going downhill like that. I pray that she will come to know the love of Christ." I bit my tongue. Dawn didn't seem to notice my irritation. "Comes to us all in the end" she continued. "*The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate ...*" It was the kind of observation an old woman would have made, and sounded strange in Dawn's mouth. I'd always loathed that hymn. "Do you know," she said, "I remember when Mum used to clean up here. Terrified, she was, of doing Freddie's study. All that china. China from China." She laughed at her own joke. I didn't see the point in telling her china was called china because it came from China. Dawn slurped from her mug. "On Saturday mornings, when I was a kid" she continued, "I'd come with Mum. There was a huge clock in the hall with suns and moons on it, and a musical box, and a lamp with a silver woman holding the bulb. It was like something off the telly." She giggled, embarrassed. I was really beginning to wish she'd go home. "While Mum cleaned, I used to pretend I was a princess and this was my castle. Sometimes" she said, conspiratorially, "I used to wish I was Mrs Dashwood's little girl. Isn't that awful? One weekend when Mr and Mrs Dashwood were away, I went into Mr Dashwood's study and dropped one of his vases. It was a Ming or something."

"God, that's terrible" I said. For the first time in five minutes I actually meant something I said to Dawn.

"Mum went potty. Well, I shouldn't have been in there, should I? Mind you, there was another vase exactly the same, so it probably wasn't that much of a disaster." Francesca had once told me that Freddie's collection of eighteenth century Chinese porcelain had been

featured repeatedly in *Collector* magazine. Dawn continued, “Mrs Dashwood wasn’t back until the next Tuesday. Hark at me,” said Dawn, laughing a little strangely. Her face was pink. “I still get all hot under the collar thinking about it. On Tuesday, Mum made me come with her to the house. She was practically in tears when she spilled the beans to Mrs Dashwood. She took the blame, which made me feel even worse.”

“Francesca can be very forgiving -” I started.

“- Oh, if only she knew what we’d been through” interrupted Dawn, putting her hands out, palms up. Mum spent the whole weekend pacing up and down, going on about remortgaging the house. And it was all for nothing. Mrs Dashwood told Mum not to worry. Spilt milk and all that. She thanked Mum for being honest and said she never really liked the vase anyway.” Dawn sighed. “Disasters don’t seem to matter to people with money, do they?” She knocked one of Francesca’s gloves onto the floor.

I picked it up. “Why not take the rest of the day off?” I said.

Once she’d gone, I went outside and, while the kitchen door flapped in the wind, I undid the knots on the bulging bin liners and dug into the crap to see if I could find the catalogues. I did. Soggy and brown with teabag stains. I left them where they were, retied the plastic bags and washed my hands.

Chapter Nineteen

“Olive oil. Onions. A clove of garlic. Patch, darling, I want to apologise for my little contretemps yesterday.”

“And a pinch of salt” I said. I was following rather an unconvincing recipe for savoury rice that Francesca was recounting to me. “Hey” I smiled at her: “forget it.” The low midday sun was reaching through the window. The kitchen was pleasantly steamy.

“One bayleaf. You’re very kind” she murmured. “And I should be more careful. I used to get so cross when Freddie was grouchy; which doesn’t really seem fair, does it?”

I remembered the rather formal letter I had received from Francesca, telling me Freddie had died. “A blessing” most people had said and, at the time, I hadn’t disagreed. It must have been hard for her, nursing an invalid for all those years. Now that every day, every good time Francesca and I enjoyed was a bonus, I wondered if people would say similar things about her when it came to it. Just the thought of well-intentioned platitudes made me sick. I turned on the gas and poured olive oil into the heavy frying pan. “How did you meet him?” I asked.

“He’d worked with my father at the Foreign Office. Used to come to supper. Wonderful raconteur.”

“Freddie was older than you, wasn’t he?” I fished. This was a rare occasion - Francesca talking about her past. I was curious.

“Fourteen years. Mother wasn’t at all happy, but I was set on him. Daddy came to the rescue. He told her I could do an awful lot worse and luckily Freddie had a very promising career in those days.”

“How did he propose to you?” I knew the story was bound to be romantic.

“He gave Mother a beautiful silk parasol, took me to the *Landesborough* and got me plastered on *Dolce de Lattes*. Brilliant man. Travelled all over the Far East. Such a waste.” The rice, garlic and the onions crackled as I tipped them into the hot fat. “Not all at the same time!” Francesca groaned.

“It’s a bit late now” I muttered, poking furiously around the smoking frying-pan. The contents were turning grey. I hacked about with a wooden spoon.

“I was twenty when we married. It was a wonderful day – champagne, sack-loads of confetti -”

“I think the rice is burning” I interrupted.

Francesca stood up. She took the spoon from me, prodded about a bit. “You know, Patch,” she mused, after a moments silence, “all things considered, I don’t regret a thing.” She paused and sat back down again. “Though I would have liked to have had children. Stock.”

“Sorry?” I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my sleeve.

“Two cupfuls.” She looked at me. “It just never happened”.

“Tina had a miscarriage,” I said. The liquid bubbled furiously as I poured it over the rice and jammed the lid on. There was a metallic clattering as steam escaped and white goo ran down onto the hob. The cooker was hissing violently.

“Patch – turn the heat down.”

I leapt for the controls. “Shit” I mouthed and shoved my smarting wrist under the cold tap. “Alan Gunter said that John gave her a hard time over it.”

“What nonsense.” She paused. “Peppercorns. The shelf next to the draining board.” I fetched them, shook a few into my palm. “And baby squashes. Slice them on the mandolin.” She sighed. “I think they hoped a child would bring them closer together.” I put the peppercorns into the mortar and started pounding them up. A few clattered to the floor. Francesca shook her head. “What a mess” she said.

Chapter Twenty

On Sunday morning, the doorbell rang. Francesca was still asleep upstairs. I answered the door. "John," I said smiling. "You're early. Tea?" He barged past me and slammed the door. The windows rattled. "Everything alright?" I asked.

"No, Patch," he stormed. "Everything's not fucking alright. What the hell do you think you're playing at?"

"Sorry?" I stared at him. He looked absolutely furious – almost as angry as the day he'd crashed the car. "What are you talking about?"

His hand was shaking as he handed me a newspaper. I took the battered copy of the *Sunday Splash*. It took me a moment to see what he was talking about.

Exclusive by Annabel Lacey, showbiz reporter: SLEUTHING SISTER SOLVES PETTY SECRET? I felt sick. Emma Petty, sister of the eighties pop icon, Tina (Thin Air, I Thought About You Yesterday etc.) has pledged to find out the truth surrounding the mystery of the troubled singer's disappearance. "I really miss her," sobbed music teacher, Emma, 30. "And I'll never be able to grieve properly until I find out what really happened."

"I never said that" I said. "Well, not in those words."

Emma has already interviewed Alan Gunter, Terminal Blonde's bass player, and Manager, rock tycoon, Philip Jacobs. Petty's boyfriend at the time of her disappearance, heart-throb actor, John Fairfax (Eddie from Liverpool Lullaby, Dabber from Flashback), is proving more elusive. "Her disappearance drove him to a nervous breakdown," says feisty Emma. "He still finds it hard to talk about her." I scanned the page in horror. Emma considers suicide unlikely. "I never thought her to be the type." Good luck, Sleuth Petty. Watch this space.

Oh fuck. I flushed hot and cold. I was too stunned to say anything. I folded the newspaper as though that might somehow contain the mess. Upstairs, Francesca was running a bath. I could hear the whine of the cistern. "She sounded really nice," I said. "Said she was a friend of Alan's. I thought she was just a fan. She knew all about Tina. Dates and everything."

"Of course she did. She's done her research."

"I didn't know she was a reporter. I would never have ... Oh God," I groaned. How could I have been so stupid?"

"Bloody stupid." John looked out of the window. His breathing was a little laboured.

"I don't know what to say."

"You should be more careful."

"I'm really sorry."

There was silence. "What is it you want to know?" he said, at last.

"What?"

"About Tina." The question threw me. John rubbed the back of his neck. "Get your coat," he said, finally.

"Where are we going?"

"I need some air."

Redwater was famous for its rich seams of iron. *Grimes Pots* was the local name for the small, wooded hill behind *Woodside*, which had been mined from ancient times until the middle of the nineteenth century. The Roman open-cast excavations which scarred the area with great chasms and craters were now covered in wild garlic, moss and ivy. Later miners had sunk shafts deep into the rock. Miles of tunnels, according to the local guidebooks, honeycombed the entire hill, and for safety reasons, the entrances had been boarded up. It was one of these mines that Stringer and I had found that day.

Grimes Pots was a site of special historic interest. A Science Fiction Series – *The Outsiders*, had been filmed amid the strange rock formations and ragged blastings. In summer, little light pierced the tree canopy. Thick roots gripped boulders. The soil was shallow – high winds often tore the trees over.

John and I walked up the narrow track, over the stile and under the trees. A tyre hung on a rope from a tree branch and dangled over a twenty-foot gorge. We sat on a boulder, overlooking a ravine. "Okay, I'll tell you what I can."

"You mean you don't mind?"

He sighed. "Come on, Patch. Let's get it over with."

I reached inside my jacket pocket for my cigarettes. "What went wrong, John? Between you and Tina?"

John was silent for some time. His voice, when he spoke, was careful and considered: "Towards the end of 1983, Tina started suffering from depression. She started taking cocaine regularly. We nearly split up. Decided to give things another go. We tried for a kid, but Tina

miscarried.” He flicked ash onto the soggy leaves. The wind was making the boughs above us creak. “After she lost the baby, Tina started using really heavily. Four or five grams a day. It was costing a fortune. She refused to get professional help. The cocaine made her paranoid. She got really possessive. Hated being left alone. She started turning up at rehearsals, causing scenes.”

“Did it affect your career?” I asked.

John shrugged. “Well, it didn’t help.”

I wasn’t sure how to phrase my next question in a way that didn’t sound as if I’d been discussing him even more than Annabel Lacey’s article implied. “Were you and Tina faithful?” was the best I could manage.

He thought for a long time. “We were very young, Patch,” he said gently.

“But I always thought you were in love. I mean, I know you quarrelled, but ...” I trailed off.

“I wish life was that simple,” he said.

I scraped at the ground with my heel. The earth was the colour of rust. “That argument you had,” I said, “the one where Phil and I were there. She was in a hell of a state. What was it about?” I chucked my cigarette over the jagged rocks in front of us. It got tangled up in the ivy. A thin line of blue smoke wafted upwards.

John didn’t look at me when he said, “she found out I’d been seeing someone else.”

“Someone special?”

John nodded.

“An actress?” I asked, remembering what Ricky had told me.

John shook his head. “There was an actress –” he said carefully, “– but no.”

He didn’t volunteer any more information and I didn’t quite dare ask. I picked at the moss on the boulder beside me. “What happened, exactly, the night Tina went?”

John’s voice was quiet. “After Phil Jacobs left, we’d rowed all day. More of the same. About eight o’clock I drove to the beach and walked for hours. I needed to clear my head. It was past midnight by the time I got back. Tina was gone, and so was her car. I assumed she’d gone to stay with someone. She did that sometimes. I was relieved, actually. Glad of the peace and quiet.”

“She didn’t give any indication that she was going to end it all?”

John grimaced. “This is going to sound terrible. Tina was always threatening stuff like that. After a while, you stop taking any notice.”

Francesca had said John had blamed himself terribly when Tina had vanished. Now I understood completely why he had been reticent in talking about her. “It wasn’t your fault,” I said. “She was ill.”

John said nothing. I couldn’t read his expression. In the end, he stood up. “We had been happy together,” he said finally. “In the beginning, before the music business fucked her up.”

We walked down through the ravine. A small avalanche of rocks had obscured part of the old path. “What happened to the girl you were seeing?” I asked, and added quickly “you don’t have to tell me.”

John kicked at a log. A shred of fungus dislodged, and lay on the leaves like excised tissue. “Couldn’t leave her husband. Long time ago, now.” His breath was misty in the damp air.

It’s half-past ten as I tip-toe down the drive and unlock the back door as quietly as I can. I’m out of luck. John’s there in the sitting room, rattling his car keys. “Where the bloody hell have you been?”

“Oh, God,” I mutter, mutinously. “Not another bloody lecture.”

“You’re damn right,” he snaps. “I’ve spent the last hour driving the streets looking for you.”

Just as I’m about to shout something back, I notice that his eyes are bloodshot and his shirt is all crumpled. He looks dead tired. “I’m really sorry,” I say, quietly. “I forgot the time.”

He sits down on the sofa and doesn’t say anything for a moment, so I head towards the stairs.

“Patch?” says John, quietly. “There’s a thriller on. *Naked Fury*. Just up your street.”

I turn. “You’re not still cross with me, then?”

He taps the sofa. I sit down next to him. “I wasn’t cross, Patch. Just worried. Call, next time, eh?” He puts his arm across the back of the sofa behind me.

“Okay.” I tuck my feet under me and snuggle into his side as the opening credits roll.

“Were you with Kevin?” he asks.

I nod.

He takes a breath as if he’s going to say something and then pauses.

“What?” I ask.

He sighs. "Just be careful, alright?"

The film is nearly over by the time Tina comes back. "Patch, where the fuck have you been?" she says.

"Shush." The time bomb is ticking away and there are only five minutes to get the hero's girlfriend out of the laboratory before the whole place blows sky-high.

John looks at her hard. "Patch said she was sorry."

"I should fucking well think so." Tina sits on the floor and starts picking at her toenails. "Honestly, talk about being able to twist someone around their little finger."

I feel suddenly uncomfortable, cuddled up to John, so I get up and flop down next to her.

"Been out with Kev?" Tina mouths. I nod. She nudges me and whispers, "what's he like then?"

On telly, the hero is struggling on the floor, trying to get the gun off the guy in the black suit. I remember the feeling of Stringer's hands on my bare skin. "Alright," I say.

Tina hoots with laughter. "She's blushing. Patch is blushing."

As we shuffled down the path, I caught sight of a small piece of metal, jutting out through the leaves. I bent down.

"What's that?" said John.

The trapdoor was chained shut. I wondered if my graffiti would still be legible on the walls of the cave. "Kev Stringer and I used to hang out down there, the week I stayed with you."

"Kev Stringer?" John frowned. "Oh, that kid you met at the fair."

I had a sudden memory of Kevin Stringer, how his brows had furrowed as he told me that the grass we were smoking was grown on barges in Holland, how he'd explained details of light and irrigation. I started to shiver. "The night before Agi came to collect me," I said. "I did a bunk from Francesca's. Went to bed early then climbed out of the window. I spent the night down there." I pointed to the trapdoor. "With Kevin Stringer."

John grunted.

"I was really pissed."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"And stoned."

"What's this?" he smiled. "Confession time?"

“I had to have an abortion.” There was no birdsong. Dead leaves started to rustle as the wind picked up. In the distance, across the open farmland, a patch of purple sky was starting to simmer. “First time. How unlucky is that?”

John turned. “Patch?”

“You know,” I said, smiling ruefully. “You were right. You were always telling me to be more careful.”

I slipped slightly in the mud. John gripped my elbow to steady me. I caught a whiff of his warm, sandalwoody smell.

“We were in Hungary by the time I realised,” I continued. “Agi was brilliant. She arranged everything. A private clinic in Vienna. She fed my Dad some bullshit about a school camping trip so he’d cough up the money.”

We walked in silence. Someone had dumped a fridge into one of the craters. An old mattress rotted in the undergrowth.

“I really missed Tina, then.”

“Fucking hell,” said John. He looked quite shaken.

I frowned, embarrassed suddenly by my disclosure. “I don’t know why I just told you that,” I said. We walked in silence back to *Fallowfield*. The wind was now so strong it took my breath away. It started to rain. For a while I almost forgot John was with me.

Chapter Twenty-One

There were gales during the night. Emil, who had now taken up permanent night-time residence on my bed, twitched and growled at the wind. I heard the clock chime two before I managed to get off to sleep.

Next morning, when I woke, the previous day's conversation with John was still running through my head. I groaned when I remembered that bitch, Annabel Lacey. I hoped John hadn't been offended by my questions, or worse, thought me in some way prurient. What on earth had induced me to tell him about the termination? Even Dominic didn't know.

I thought of Tina and her pink car smashed into the rocks. The catalyst for her suicide was now evident to me – she'd been about to lose John. Though it had been painful, I was glad that I'd found out what I had. Now I could finally lay the matter to rest.

I shivered on my dressing gown and pulled back the curtains. I couldn't believe what the garden looked like. There were deep drifts of leaves on the lawn. A couple of roof tiles lay smashed on the drive. The shrubs in the flowerbeds had taken a battering. The wind was still strong enough to send white clouds sprinting across the sky. Then I noticed that one of the ash-trees had blown over. Face down in its own helicopters, it lay across the drive, making *Fallowfield* completely inaccessible by road. There was a great gash of red in the turf it had been ripped from.

John would know what to do, I thought. I tried the phone, but the line was dead. Another casualty of the freak weather. Not even the faintest hint of a crackle on the line. Hey ho. I showered, dressed and pulled on my coat. As I walked to *Woodside*, I saw what havoc the gales had wreaked. The roads were covered in torn-off branches. A line of telegraph poles was down. Up in the woods, the trees creaked. The bracken was flattened. Torrents of water had washed away much of the path in places. A small brook had burst its banks.

John's car was in his drive, along with a large van which had *Roy Gilby & Co – Listed Building specialists - our reputation is your guarantee* – emblazoned across the side. I could hear someone talking across the courtyard.

"John?" I called.

No answer. I walked across the cobbles. The door to the stables was slightly ajar.

"Ah, the wanton!" I could hear John muttering, *"The harlot! Ah! The daughter of Babylon with her golden eyes and her gilded eyelids! Thus saith the Lord God, Let there come against her a multitude of men. Let the people take stones and stone her ..."*

Pause. Vague, foraging noises. I smiled. I remembered John being secretive about his reading. He'd always made great play of not being bookish. As a teenager, I was forever finding him in forgotten corners poring over plays and paperbacks. His lips would move slightly as he scanned the pages. Francesca told me once that at *Grangeside Young Offenders'* the surest way to get your teeth kicked in was to look in any way effete or intellectual. John sequestered in the stables implied he still found reading in some way a little shameful.

"Let the war captains pierce her with their swords, let them crush her beneath their shields." Something crashed to the ground. "Shit," said John, before continuing: *"It is thus that I will wipe out all wickedness from the earth and that all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations."*

"Hello?" I pushed the door. The stable was packed full of cardboard boxes. A knackered three-piece suite that I thought I recognised from John and Tina's old flat in Burrough Road. Carpet off-cuts. John was sitting in a filthy armchair, clutching a broken-spined script in his right hand. A cup of coffee was perched on the edge of a packing case. "Sounds like a laugh a minute," I said. "*Salome*, isn't it?"

He jumped and looked a little embarrassed. "I didn't know you were there," he said, standing up.

"I'm right though, aren't I? It is *Salome*?"

"Hole in one" he said, impressed. "Do you like Oscar Wilde?"

"I know the opera. Strauss set Wilde's words."

"Should run forever: Beheaded – the Musical."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it. It's brilliant."

"Featuring the hit number, *Losing my Head over You*." He ran his fingers through his hair, dislodging fine dust. "Only place I can get some peace and quiet."

I became aware of banging noises from the house. Obviously *Roy Gilby & Co* were hard at work. "I wouldn't have bothered you," I said, "but we've had a bit of a disaster at *Fallowfield*, and the phone's out."

John immediately looked concerned. "Is Francesca alright?"

"It's nothing like that. A tree blew over in the night. It's blocking the drive. I wondered if you knew anyone I could call."

"No need," said John. "I'm on my way." He went to a shed and produced a vicious looking chainsaw. He turned to me and smiled like a serial killer: "this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you," before loading it into the back of his van. When we got back to *Fallowfield*, there was a red mini parked in front of the fallen tree.

While John filled the lethal-looking machine up with petrol, I walked up to the house. Francesca was sipping tea with a casually-dressed woman that I recognised from a few weeks ago as Tessa Whitelaw, Francesca's doctor and friend. They were chatting about children and the schools in the area. I gave Francesca a good-morning kiss and smiled in the general direction of her visitor. "Nice to see you again," I said. I hoped, rather illogically, that I didn't smell too terribly of fags.

Tessa smiled. "Tried phoning this morning and couldn't get through, so I just popped over to make sure everything was okay." She sipped her tea.

"Tessa's bought me a mobile telephone," said Francesca.

It was a good idea. I wondered why I hadn't thought of it.

"Francesca's been singing your praises," said Tessa.

"Oh, God" I said. "I hope it wasn't too boring."

She smiled and it was only then that I realised she wasn't much older than me. "Oh no" she said, politely.

"The ash tree in your garden's blown down," I told Francesca.

"Tessa told me," she sighed. "We'll have to call someone out."

"No need," I said. "John's sprung to the rescue. He's outside, tanking up his chainsaw and looking like something from a slasher movie."

Francesca smiled. "How kind of him" she murmured, and then there was silence, so I left them to it and fetched the wheelbarrow that John had asked for.

There was soggy sawdust all over the grass. The noise was gruesome. I sat on one of the trunk sections and watched him coax the chainsaw through the sappy, pale wood. The few brown leaves that still clung to the branches trembled at his touch. Despite the coldness of the day, his forehead was glistening. His sleeves were rucked up. I studied the changing definition of the muscles in his forearms, and listened for his erratic breath between each

stroke. John didn't notice me at first. When he did, he picked up a newly sawn log and struck an actory pose with one foot on the broken ash-tree.

*"There be some sports are painful, and their labour
Delight in them sets off."* He spoke a little campily and I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to laugh or look impressed. He continued: *"Some kinds of baseness
Are nobly undergone, and most poor matters
Point to rich ends."*

"What are you on?" I asked.

John continued. *"...I must remove
Some thousands of these logs and pile them up,
Upon a sore injunction."*

"Fancy a cup of tea?" I went on cheerily.

"That's the wrong line." He looked fake-outraged. Now I knew he was pissing about. "You're supposed to say: *Alas, now pray you work not so hard.*"

"Says who?"

"The Tempest, Act 3 scene 1." Your next bit goes (he resumed in a ridiculous falsetto): *If you'll sit down,
I'll bear your logs the while. Pray give me that.
I'll carry it to the pile."*

"In your dreams."

"Come on, Patch" he said, grimly, "start wheeling." The barrow next to him was piled high.

After five trips to the woodpile, I stopped and watched again. John put the chainsaw down. "Can I have a go?" I asked.

"No, you bloody can't."

I sat on a log and struggled to light a cigarette. My lighter kept blowing out. "I'm knackered."

John sat next to me. "Too many fags."

I nudged him with my shoulder. Arms almost touching, we watched the long grass in the field opposite flutter and furrow in the wind. "When are you going back to London?" he said.

"This afternoon."

"Boyfriend'll be pleased to see you."

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll bet he misses you.”

“I don’t think he notices half the time.” I didn’t know why I’d said that. It wasn’t even true. John squinted sideways at me. I felt somehow a little disloyal to Dominic. “He’s a very talented musician, you know.” Now I sounded like someone’s mother.

“You live in Tooting, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m in London a fair bit,” he said. “I can give you a lift anytime.”

“You’re not still cross with me, then, about my fuck-up with that Lacey cow?”

“Course not. Forget it.” He gently brushed some sawdust from my shoulder.

I studied his big hands. There was a nick on his thumb that was bleeding slightly. “Feels a bit like old times, doesn’t it?” I said. “I keep expecting you to ask me if I’ve done my homework or something.”

He grunted. “Don’t. You’re making me feel my age.” I caught his eye and found myself blushing. “Good to see you again, Patch,” he smiled.

I heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel. Tessa was coming down the drive, her heels slopping in and out of her trainers. I stood up. “Um” I said, slowly, walking up to her. “I wanted to ask you -” she nodded patiently. I heard the snarl of the chainsaw as it started again. It all came out in a rush, then: “Francesca’s illness – I don’t know what to expect.”

Tessa matter-of-factly went into detail about the symptoms Francesca was experiencing. I bit my lip. Hearing someone else talk of Francesca’s illness made it more final, somehow. “We’ll follow the progress of the tumour closely. I’m afraid, when the time comes, she may have to go into hospital,” Tessa concluded. “The health service doesn’t stretch to round-the clock care, unfortunately.” My stomach lurched weirdly. “It’s important that she’s kept comfortable and happy. You don’t know what it means to her that you’re here.”

“I worry about her being on her own,” I said.

Tessa sighed. “So do I. I pop in when I can, just to see how she’s doing.” She raised her eyes heavenwards. “Caught her standing on a chair this morning, trying to clear out the kitchen cupboards.”

“Oh shit,” I said. “I *told* her I’d do them,” I said.

Tessa must have noticed my consternation because she frowned. “Look” she said, “I’ve got to scoot, but call me if you need anything. Anything at all.”

I thanked her and watched until her car had disappeared.

Francesca,” I yelled.

She was at the kitchen table, clutching her teacup. “Hello, darling. What’s wrong?”
“I’m furious.”

Emil slunk back into his basket. Francesca put the cup down and gazed at me through baffled eyes. “Patch, what are you talking about?”

“What the bloody hell are you doing clearing out kitchen cupboards?”

Francesca sighed. “Heavens, what a fuss.”

“It’s not a fuss. I told you I’d do them.”

“For goodness sake, Patch.”

“Tessa told me about the blackouts. It’s not safe.”

“Headaches” Francesca corrected. “Let’s not get dramatic. Anyway, it’s Tessa’s job to fret - that’s what she’s best at. You’re here to enjoy yourself. Have a liqueur chocolate”
Francesca smiled.

There was a gust of air and dark shape at the doorway. “Just thought I’d make a cuppa. Either of you fancy one?” said John, and then, switching his gaze from my thunderous face to Francesca’s patient one, “am I interrupting anything?”

Francesca dropped her gaze.

“If anything happened to you ...” I choked a little “If anything...”

“I know, darling” Francesca interrupted and rattled the box.

“I don’t want a fucking chocolate.”

“Patch.” John said quietly. His face was blankly polite. “There’s another wheelbarrow load outside.”

“But -”

“- please.” He smiled at me but looked resolute.

I huffed and shut the door behind me.

It took another three trips to hump the last of the wood over to the log-store. When I’d finished, I peered through the kitchen window. John and Francesca were still talking. Quietly, moderately. I walked through into the bathroom. There was an oily smudge above my left eyebrow. I hoped it was a relatively recent acquisition. I ripped off a piece of loo roll and rubbed furiously. Little pellets of wet tissue paper stuck to my face like flaking skin.

“Nearly finished, Patch.” Tina, fresh from a day at art school, is giving me a witch’s face. I am sitting on the toilet seat, bouncing the rubber heels of my gym shoes against the pedestal. I can feel her breath, the static of her wig, as she cups my face in her hand, smoothing the corner of my eye with her thumb. I am laughing so much the black smudges and the point of the brush jabs me above the eyebrow. She rips off a piece of loo roll, licks it and scrubs my face. Carefully draped over the laundry basket is a cape made of black binliners, stuck all over with milk-top stars.

“Stop it - I’m going to wee myself.”

Agi is cross about something. Her thick accent reverberates through the locked door: “Tina, liv ze child elone. She is not e toy.”

Tina is a vampire. She has *Smartie*-coloured lips, a black wig and a dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves which belonged to the Agi of long-ago, with a smile and a waist staring out of the photograph on the piano.

Tina spits on her palm and scrubs my eyebrow hard, then takes her half-smoked cigarette from the soap dish. It leaves a brown stain. She inhales, proudly examines her masterpiece, then smiles and cuddles me.

“Oh, yes. You’re going to be a very scary witch, Patch.”

“Can I look now?” I ask, sliding out of her embrace and slipping off the pink plastic seat without waiting for an answer. Tina grips my shoulders and shoves me back.

“I haven’t done your wart yet.” Even I find revolting the brownish gobbet Tina removes from her mouth and starts kneading onto my chin. “What is it?” I scream, as I struggle. “A raspberry fruit-pastille,” she reassures me; “now, sit still.” She presses hard. It smells of decaying apples and nicotine. She pulls her lips over her teeth. “Do this!” I copy her. “And rub together like this.” She winds down the black lipstick and reaches into a plastic carrier bag. “And now ...”

A huge, bent plastic nose on a piece of elastic. She puts it over my own and secures the elastic, with a snap, at the back of my head. “Ouch!”

I heard John using the Francesca’s telephone. When he’d finished, they both came in. Francesca looked a bit sheepish.

“I hope you were seriously bollocked,” I said.

“Dawn’s coming on a daily basis from now on,” said John.

“There,” said Francesca. “Does that put your mind at rest?”

Not entirely, but it was better than nothing. I hugged her and told her I was sorry for shouting at her. She said it was sweet of me to worry. Eventually, Francesca pulled away and shuffled towards the kitchen, mumbling something about sandwiches.

I've always hated goodbyes. They make you aware of the passing of time, the end of something and render the person you're leaving distant – a small, waving figure - even as they stand in front of you.

Tina had never said goodbye. Her final words to me were singularly un-momentous. They carried no intimation of finality.

Tessa had tried to prepare me for the unpredictability of Francesca's illness. "It could be anytime," she had said. "But a couple of months at the most." As I embraced Francesca on the front doorstep, I stumbled for words - aware that nothing I could say could possibly mean enough.

John had promised me a lift to the station. His car engine was still running as he got out. "Patch," he called. "You'll miss your train."

Francesca's eyes went glassy, and her back began to shake. I smoothed her hair.

"Next week," I promised. "And I'll call you."

"All aboard the Wichita-Cannonball!"

I heard Elaine's car before I saw it. She cut the engine and climbed out. "There you are. Where in Heaven have you been?" she said to John, not so much crossly as concerned. "You've forgotten your meeting with Hugh and Philly. I found them waiting at *Woodside*. They've driven from London."

John clutched his forehead. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck."

Elaine looked a little shocked. "I've been trying to call you. Why's your mobile's switched off?" John seemed to crumple. I was disappointed by how ordinary he had suddenly become. "Honestly, John, I don't know what's got into you, lately." Elaine shook her honey-coloured hair. "Come back home immediately. I've left them clutching instant coffee. We haven't even got any biscuits."

"I'll be right back. I'm just taking Patch to the station."

"It's okay," I said. He dropped his gaze. "I'll walk."

"Sorry Patch."

“Don’t worry,” I said. “There’s another train in an hour.”

I watched John climb into the car with Elaine. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but Elaine seemed to be shouting. Once the car was out of sight, I shrugged my rucksack over my shoulders and set off for the station.

PART FIVE

Sunday 23rd June 1985

Have been so busy for the last few days that I haven't had a chance to write anything in my diary. Have been out most of the time with Francesca. We've been to Packwych Castle, Rydney Arboretum, and we've even been up to Crecy's Yat where you can look through a telescope and see the Peregrine Falcons. This afternoon, we got chased by some cows. I fell in a load of shit. It had just been dumped so it was really rank. Went in my hair and everything. Francesca nearly wet herself.

Francesca is dead cool. She's not up herself like I thought she would be. She's very posh and calls everyone darling but she's not snobbish at all. She thinks my nose ring is a triumph, darling!! She told me all about John. She really likes him. I expect it's because she doesn't have any kids of her own.

Francesca says I have real talent as a pianist and that I must keep it up. On Thursday she got some people from the village to come and listen to me play some Chopin and (yawn) The Moonlight Sonata. Afterwards, everyone clapped for ages, even Freddie. Then Francesca opened a load of wine and we all got a bit pissed. It was brilliant.

On Friday, went down The Signalman's Retreat with Dawn. There was a disco upstairs. Kev was there. Dawn's a jammy cow. She won first prize in the church raffle. An instamatic camera. Says it's the first thing she's ever won in her life. Wish I'd bought some tickets now. Dawn took a picture of me and Kev and we watched the picture develop. We got really arseholed. Afterwards, John picked me up and had to walk me around the garden for ages. I puked four times.

This morning, Dawn phoned. She was crying. Her Mum was waiting up for her when she got back last night and gave her a hiding for being drunk. She's not allowed to go out anymore. Poor Dawn. Her Mum never lets her do anything.

This afternoon, I met Kev in the cave. He asked me to go out with him. Said yes. Let him take my top and bra off. It was a bit embarrassing at first, especially when he started putting his mouth there as well. It felt quite nice but a bit funny. When he started trying to undo my flies I told him to stop. He asked if I loved him. Told him I did. He said he'd be careful. I said I'd think about it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Can you check it for me again?" I stared down at the red reminder.

There was a clicking sound as the woman on the other end of the phone tapped into her computer. "No, I'm afraid that's correct. Here we are. Cancelled on the 2nd July."

"I'm sure there must be a mistake." I turned. "Dom?" I asked. He was making random movements with his mouse, a dreamy, other-worldly expression on his face. "Dom" I demanded. He looked over sulkily. He beeped an error signal. "They reckon we've cancelled our direct debit." Dominic didn't say anything, which said everything. I rubbed my forehead and tried to sound cheerfully apologetic, though actually I felt like screaming and killing my boyfriend. "I'm sorry," I said. "Lack of communication our end."

"Happens all the time," said the operator, kindly. "Call us back if you need any help."

I thanked her and replaced the receiver. "What the fuck are you on, Dominic?"

"I was going to pay it" he protested.

I slumped back, folded my arms, and breathed heavily. "It's a month late."

"Look, it's my problem, alright?"

I couldn't believe this. "No, it fucking isn't your problem. It's my problem if the phone gets cut off."

"Oh God, here we go." Arguments about money were not infrequent - Dominic's casual CD purchases, the undiscussed new recording equipment on interest-free loans that turned out to be small-print larceny. After our last row, I'd divided up our outgoings so that he paid the telephone and I paid everything else. That, at least, I thought he could manage. "I'm sorry, Em" he said. He shifted around uneasily in his swivel chair, and then wrinkled his forehead in appeal. "You know work's been a bit quiet, recently."

I was astonished he even mentioned it. "Whose fault is that? Did I tell you to jack in the Hi-fi shop? You told me you were going to get more gigs."

He looked down at his keyboard and pressed down the bottom B flat. It farted through the air like a cartoon sound-effect. His face was red and crumpled. "Please don't go off on one. I've said I'll get the money, and I will."

I laughed hysterically. "Don't be ridiculous."

"My Mum's giving it to us."

"What do you mean, your Mum?" I was mortified.

"She's sending us a cheque."

“I’m not having your Mum paying our phone bill.”

“She doesn’t mind.”

“Dominic. I mind.” And then I stopped. It gradually dawned on me. “She’s done it before, hasn’t she?” I said quietly. He carefully turned off his equipment and watched the green lights fade. “For fuck’s sake” I yelled, and then I wasn’t angry any more. I just felt tired.

He picked up his jacket. His mouth was trembling. Before slamming the door, he shouted, “why do you always want to make me feel stupid?” His voice was strange and tight.

I heard Dominic’s footsteps on the path, and the gate squeaking shut. Then the quietness was deafening. I sat on the sofa and pressed the TV remote control.

An American sitcom about a housewife, who is really a witch. There are no poor, sick and hungry people in canned-laughter-land so she uses her powers to land her moronic husband in scrapes. This week she had somehow transformed him into a human-sized rabbit. (Presumably they had someone on payroll to think up this crap.) “Okay, okay” the rabbit chortled. “So I made a bit of a boo-boo. I’m sorry, but please get me outa here.” His witch-wife wiggled her nose cutely, like she always does – (canned-chuckling) – and the rabbit explodes in a puff of smoke, just as the cops burst through the door.

The fake audience was howling with laughter. The sound was distorting on my cheap set. The doorbell went. Dominic must have forgotten his keys. I got up, wearily, and wandered down the hall, rubbing my nose on my sleeve and trying to compose myself for the inevitable compromise and hushed reconciliation. As I opened the front door, the nylon carpet got all rucked up. I bent down and tugged the carpet flat.

“Bob-a-Job?” chirped a familiar voice, cheerily through the gap.

“John?” I said, in amazement. I got off my hands and knees and pulled the handle.

“I was just passing and I had something in the car for –” In spite of my teary face, I couldn’t help looking up. His smile faded. “- God, Patch, what’s the matter?”

I opened the door wider. “It’s so good to see you,” I mumbled. “Come in.” Then I was embarrassed by my dog-eared paperbacks, the second-hand armchairs, the *Rose Hill Crematorium – No Smoking* sign I’d nicked when I was a student and which hung crookedly over the gas fire. Oh God, the remains of one of Dominic’s revolting just-add-water noodle pots. There was a melted triangle in the carpet from before I’d bought the ironing board. The yellow flowers, which I’d thought might brighten the place up, looked limply tragic, as if

they had spent the last of themselves trying to escape the brackish water. Dominic's unpaid-for equipment glowered in the corner of the room. "Dominic and I had a row," I said.

"Where is he?"

I shrugged. "Somewhere. I don't know."

"Come on, I'm taking you out."

We drove up towards the river, past tower blocks, parades of shops, tree-lined streets. We parked in Richmond. It was threeish, dull and freezing. A fine mist of rain made everything look drab.

"Chicago Charlie fingered the trigger of his .357 Magnum. The girl on his arm wore a diamond as big as a *Hershey Kiss*," murmured John, as we squelched across the soggy playing fields towards the river.

To our right, a group of rugby players shivered in their shorts. "Come on" the coach was yelling. "Keep it moving, lads, keep it moving." What a bloody stupid game. I stuck my hands in my pockets. "Loose ball there, Trev!" Trev missed his chance and the filthy ball scudded in our direction. John booted it back to one of the players.

"Cheers, mate" shivered a fat forward.

At a bridge across the river we stopped. One of the arches had been turned into a small café. We walked in, ordered cappuccinos and profiteroles and then sat at a table next to the window. The place was deserted except for us. Half the café had been roped off and a teenage girl was mopping the floor. John spoke first. "So, kid; you want to talk about it?"

After all the turbulence I had experienced recently – Dominic, College, Annabel (fucking) Lacey and, of course Francesca, I slipped easily into the cosy familiarity of my teenage years with John. Silly voices, allusions to B-movies, ancient advertising jingles. For a moment, I felt about twelve again – and was happy. I half expected him to offer to buy me an ice-cream.

Once we'd finished eating, I talked about my work at the college, the piano lessons, Dominic and me. "What makes me cross about Dominic" I concluded, "is not that he doesn't get gigs - he's actually very talented and he's had some lousy luck recently – it's that he doesn't pull his weight. Whenever anything goes wrong he runs back to his Mum. It's pathetic." John did not respond this time. I could hear the muffled thud of music from the pub opposite. Sudden bursts of laughter. Through the window I could see a television screen the size of a refrigerator. A football match. Live, and halfway across the world. "Here we go, here we go, here we go (fuck you)" sang the group of blokes watching.

John drained his cup. "He probably feels bad stinging you for money all the time."

"I don't know what to do any more," I said.

"Talk it over with him."

"We'll just end up arguing."

The next question threw me. "Does he make you happy?"

"I'm not unhappy," I said, cautiously.

That's not what I asked."

"Sometimes I just wish he was a bit more – a bit more –" I trailed off.

The teenage girl turned the *open* sign on the door around. "We're closing now," she said. I looked at my watch and realised we'd been there for the best part of an hour.

We paid, left, and sat on a bench opposite the river. John leaned forward, elbows on knees and stared at the opposite bank. "Patch, you can't turn people into what they're not," he said, eventually, continuing the conversation where we'd left off. "It isn't worth trying and it isn't fair. On either of you."

"It's probably my fault" I sighed.

"It's probably nobody's fault." John picked up a flat pebble and skimmed it on the rippling surface of the river. It had grown colder while we talked. The bench-slats were slightly damp, and an orange speckling of mould was forming on the arm-rest. A few loose tangles of nylon fishing line shivered in the wind. "Patch, if you're skint I can lend you a bit. I've been working," he said. I remembered this wasn't strictly true.

"It's really kind of you" I said, quickly, "but no - thanks."

"Well, it's there if you need it. I know what it's like to be broke." Two of the old boathouses had been turned into upmarket outlets. The canoeing equipment place and the sandwich bar that boasted speciality cheeses and Italian delicatessen, were both shut. A third shop was in the process of being refurbished. *Closing Down – Everything Must Go* was written in whitewash across the window. A picture-framers had set out boxes of prints and old book illustrations on the forecourt. Three for twenty quid. They were divided into categories: *Geographical. Botanical. Historical. Humorous.* The tops of the plastic wrappings were wet. A woman in a striped jersey opened the door and started taking the boxes inside. "The last year I was with Tina," he continued, "we were as poor as church mice." I hadn't provoked this confidence in any way, and was glad that John felt more comfortable discussing my sister with me. "She'd borrowed to do up *Woodside*. Landed a

massive tax bill. Her record company advance hadn't lasted ten minutes and I hadn't had work in over a year."

I remembered the series of convertibles that Tina had written off. The celeb-wardrobe she commissioned each new season. The crippling cocaine habit. "How did you manage?"

John smiled. "Borrowed from friends. Francesca helped a lot."

I frowned. "I never understood how I got money from Tina's estate."

"There were the spin-offs after she disappeared. Merchandising stuff. All those retrospective album releases. It mounted up."

A pleasure cruiser slid through the water. Inside were streamers, flashing lights, tinny Seventies music. A private function, perhaps? Through the window, I could see a couple kissing. I watched until they disappeared under the bridge, until all that was left were the moored boats rocking in the foam V of its wake. "And you're going to live at *Woodside*?"

"I was going to flog it, but Elaine fell in love with the place. Dare say it's about time I settled down."

"Won't it feel a bit weird?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's only a house."

I pulled out a crumpled cigarette and lit one. "Are you going to marry her?" I asked and instantly realised it was none of my bloody business.

"We've discussed it."

John and I walked back along the towpath. All the shops had been sealed away behind corrugated security blinds. We stepped over the wooden bridge. The rugby field was deserted but for a dog lapping dirty water from the gashes in the turf that the players' studs had made.

"Will you be alright?" John said, unlocking the car.

"Something'll give." Even to my own ears, I sounded unconvincing.

John drove me back to my flat. As I undid my seatbelt, he scrabbled in the glove compartment and produced a video-tape. "Had this transferred onto VHS for you. It's that barbecue we had." He handed the cassette to me. "Call me if you need to."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next afternoon, when I returned from work, there were cups and glasses gleaming soap-suddily on the draining board. There was washing rotating, mid-cycle in the machine. The dying flowers had been ditched, and, in their place, was a small, petrol-station cactus with an artificial flower glued to the side. Dominic was rather pink.

“Where have you been?” I asked. He hadn’t come back last night.

He looked a little subdued. “Mum’s.” he said. “I’ve made you some lunch.” He spooned out some fresh pasta parcels and ladled some packet sauce over the top. “It’s a bit cold, now” he said.

“It looks lovely.”

He cleared his throat. “Em?” Dom straightened the Indian print throw on the arm on the chair. “I’ve got myself a job.” He looked thoroughly wretched.

“Where?”

“Sandwich shop. Nerissa needs an assistant.”

“Oh Dom.” I didn’t know what to say. “Well done” was patronising and, given that it was I who had bollocked him in the first place, commiserations were also inappropriate.

“The plant’s for you,” said Dom. “To say sorry.”

I thought of how I had slagged off Dominic to John the previous evening and felt immensely disloyal. I looked around the flat. The place had been vacuumed, the pictures straightened, the CDs stacked neatly in the corner. I noticed an unfamiliar, calamine-pink garment scraping against the glass door of the washing machine. My white college shirt in the coloured wash. Never mind.

Dom had clearly spent time thinking the whole thing through and was doing his level best to make amends. A few weeks ago, this would have been unthinkable. Why then, did his efforts make me feel even more bloody miserable?

“Couple of letters for you,” said Dominic.

The first was from Agi.

Édes Csillagom (my sweet star – the letter was in Hungarian), how kind of you to call last week. I was so sorry to hear of poor Francesca. Naturally I understand it might be difficult for you to visit Hungary over Christmas. Please do not worry. Francesca has been a good friend to you.

We too, have been busy. Uncle Feri and I are decorating - I never knew how much rubbish we gathered over the years. I found your baby-suit yesterday. I have, of course, kept it safe – just in case! I am sorry, I know you hate it when I speak of such things so all I say is that Dominic is a nice boy and your poor old mother lives in hope! (My mother is entirely kind-hearted but not exactly tactful on occasions).

Feri is painting your room blue. He remembers it is your favourite colour. (I was beginning to picture a powder-blue nursery with Bo-Peep mobiles and a giant teddy).

Please send our kind wishes to Francesca. It is difficult for you now, I know. Telephone any time you need us.

Ölelünk és imádunk

Anyu.

The second was a small envelope with a hand-written address and a second-class stamp. The picture on the card inside was of a sunset taken with a filter lense. The caption underneath ran *I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. John 8:12.* I opened it and a photograph fell out. *Dear Patch - found this snap and thought you'd like to have it, luv Dawn* went the greeting. It was the photograph she'd taken that evening at *The Signalman's Rest* with her new camera. In the picture, my stiff, back-combed hair lurched drunkenly to one side as I made an obscene gesture at the camera. Kevin's arm was curled around my waist and with his free hand he was raising his pint of lager. We both looked impossibly young.

I looked up at Dominic, scraping ancient crumbs out of the grill pan. "Here, Dom, want a laugh?" I said, in an attempt at conciliation, and showed him the photograph.

Dominic wiped his hands on the tea-towel. "God, Em," he said. "You mean you went out like that?" He pointed to Stringer's white-blond head. "Who's this?"

"Boy I met the week I stayed with Tina."

"Holiday romance?"

"Hardly a romance."

Dominic stared at the picture of Stringer then handed it back. "Looks like a nice bloke."

Later that afternoon, as I flicked through my bank statements, tapping the same old numbers into a calculator in a last-ditch attempt at making the figures add up to the right answer, the telephone rang.

"Is that you, Patch?"

Dawn. "Hi," I said. "I was going to call you later. Thanks for the photo."

She giggled. "Thought it would make you chuckle."

I attempted a smile. "How's things?"

"Really great. Me and Neville have booked a holiday. Tenerife. Next April. He said he thought I needed a break. You see, my prayers were answered."

I stared at my bank statements. There was a twenty-five quid debit I didn't recognise. I flicked through my chequebook counterfoils. *Angelo's*. My hilarious haircut. "Great" I said grumpily. "Er - I mean, that's wonderful."

"You don't sound too full of the joys of spring," she said. "Anything the matter?"

"Oh, just life," I said, deliberately vague and all-encompassing. I didn't want to go into detail.

"Is it your boyfriend?" asked Dawn, sympathetically. I didn't reply. "Men!" she exclaimed. "Can't live with them, can't live without them." I wanted to scream at the cliché. Its sentiments were too dispiriting for words. Dawn was suddenly serious. "Patch – do you mind if I say something?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "It's only because – well – I know how you feel." She stumbled over her words. "I was really depressed, and Jesus's love helped me through it. He was really good to me."

"Dawn" I said. "I know you mean well but -"

"- it's okay, you don't have to explain" she interrupted, quickly. "Just promise me you'll think about it. Just think about it."

Chapter Twenty-Four

As I was having my morning fag in the covered walkway outside college, my mobile rang.

“Hello, is that *Rent-a-Limb Prosthetics*? I need a helping hand.”

“John.” I grew a little breathless to hear his voice and leaned against one of the metal pillars. “What’s up?”

He lowered his voice. “Complete SNAFU.”

“What’s gone wrong?”

“Elaine’s birthday tomorrow. Totally forgot.”

“Well, buy a card. Get some chocs.”

“She’s on a diet.” She would be.

“Flowers?”

“Patch, can you free yourself up?”

“John, I’m teaching.” Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a student who had bunked one of my classes that morning. I pretended not to notice her.

“Please, Patch.”

I racked my brain as to how I could dodge the searchlights and escape. “Okay,” I said, “I can have developed a temperature by lunchtime. Is that soon enough?”

Oxford Street was heaving. Only 32 shopping days till Christmas. We fought our way through pushchairs and chestnut vendors. There were fake-Victorian roasting contraptions that blocked half the pavement. Music belted from every doorway.

I magnanimously (and temporarily) shelved my reservations about Elaine, and tried to think of a present she’d be pleased with. For John’s sake. “How about a shirt?”

“Great” said John.

We spent twenty minutes leafing through a rack of organdie prints.

“What size does she take?”

“Sort of average, I guess.”

“For fuck’s sake, John.”

We stepped aside to avoid a crowd that had assembled around a guy with a plastic attaché case, selling dodgy-looking watches. At the corner of Argyll Street, a lad in a tatty

grey blanket was scrounging change. A bloke was caramelising peanuts in a copper bowl – more fake Victoriana. *Blood Countess*, a musical based on the life of Elizabeth Bathory (*The scent of terror. The taste of ecstasy.*) was on at the Palladium.

“Does she read?”

“Not really.”

“Cook?”

“Great. What do you suggest?”

“Ice-cream maker?”

John didn’t enthuse.

“Silly me – the diet. Espresso machine, then?”

“She’s got one. God, I hate shopping. Shall we have a coffee?”

It was all I could do to bring myself to say “no”.

... *come on everybody, let’s all have a party* ... enthused an electronically generated, transatlantic voice. I turned. “Look, look -” I caught John’s arm and pointed to where the music was coming from: a foot-high, anthropomorphic Christmas tree on a trestle-table outside a shop, flapping its branches and fluttering its eyelids to the tinny beat. I pushed the shop-door open. It was one of those maverick outlets that spring up just before Christmas and evaporate, just as suddenly, after the January sales. The merchandise was a strange mixture: five year diaries, brass-effect carriage clocks (the domes were plastic) Santa hats (made in Korea – I could picture ragged urchins stitching the red nylon in the tropical heat), action-hero dolls from a cartoon that had been all the rage a couple of years back. There were more automata inside. Santas. Snowmen in sunglasses. I reached out a hand to examine a battery-operated spruce tree. It flung itself off the display-shelf and writhed about the floor, singing in Japanese. I jumped. “Shit.”

John was laughing. “Come on, Patch, let’s get the hell out of here.”

One book shop, two record shops and a cappuccino later, we were no nearer finding Elaine’s present. The day had not been entirely fruitless, though. John bought me a novel he’d enjoyed and I bought him a recording of the *Turangalila Symphony*.

It was six o’clock. The decent shops were closing and the crap ones were going into pre-Christmas overdrive. I remembered many panic-purchase Christmasses, wrapping rubbish I’d bought in a hurry. I gazed around, desperately searching for inspiration. Belts. Walkmans. A wax-jacket. One department store was still open.

Ground Floor. Ladies’ Accessories – Millinery – Hosiery – Cosmetics.

"Handbag?" I suggested.

"Not really my colour" said John.

I giggled.

"She's got millions of them."

"Purse?"

"Perfume," he said, suddenly. "She likes perfume."

"Brilliant. What does she wear?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll recognise it if I smell it."

We ran past a pseudo-scientific cosmetics concession. The *Symbiotics* range. At the perfume counter, I picked up a bottle shaped like a woman's torso, sprayed my wrist and held it under John's nose. "What do you reckon?"

"It's not that."

"Nice, though" I suggested.

He picked up another bottle and sprayed my wrist. "How about this?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Gross."

"And this?"

"Boys' toilets."

"Ozone notes are very fashionable at present," sneered a severely well-groomed sales assistant. The more perfume we tried, the more difficult it became to distinguish which was which. I rolled my sleeves up to the elbows, but all the un-fragranced skin got used up in no time.

"God, I stink."

"Bingo" said John, first sniffing and then triumphantly holding up a bottle. "It's this."

"John, that's after-shave."

"Okay, not perfume," he said, replacing the bottle, a little crestfallen.

First Floor. Lingerie – Ladies' wear – Shoes.

John raced through the underwear Department as though he hadn't noticed it was there.

"Slow down" I said. "Some of this stuff's really nice. John?"

He'd vanished.

Second Floor. Interior Decoration – Haberdashery – Lighting – Gifts.

I found him next to the escalator, looking at a display of chess sets. He was examining a hand-carved quartz bishop. "I like this" he said a little absently.

“Does Elaine play?” I asked.

“What? Oh. No,” said John.

“Well, come on then.”

We just beat the lift-doors.

Ground Floor. Ladies' Accessories – Millinery – Hosiery – Schoolwear.

... We will be closing in five minutes. Please make your way to the payment-points.

Thank you for your custom.

Just as we were about to leave, I stopped. “Aren’t they beautiful?” I said, pointing to a collection of devoré scarves.

“Just the job,” said John. I pulled one out from the wooden ladder-rack display, hand-painted in iridescent silvers, violets and plums. “Think she’ll like it?” he asked.

“Don’t you?”

“Yeah. Really nice.”

“Sorted.” He carried the scarf over to the till, without looking at the price.

We stopped outside the tube station and smiled at one another.

“Patch,” said John, “you’re a fucking diamond.”

“Don’t mention it. I had a nice time.” I handed him a bag. “These are for you.”

He growled in mock-consternation.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said, quickly. I’d seen the mugs while he’d been queuing. They hadn’t even been expensive. “Better than a jam-jar, eh?”

He hugged me as if I was a teenager. “Thanks. Don’t do it again.”

“See you soon,” I said, kissing his cheek.

“Yeah.” He paused, frowning at me.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

He pulled away, somewhat abruptly, then scuffed the hair on the back of his neck.

“Better be off, Patch,” he mumbled.

I watched him disappear down the street. For some inexplicable reason, I suddenly felt drained and a bit teary.

Chapter Twenty-Five

On Friday, when I returned from the bank, Dom was hopping about in his boxers, trying to get ready for his stint at the sandwich bar. “Oh, God, I’m late. Car ran out of fuel. Petrol gauge is knackered. It just stays on full all the time. Can I borrow a tenner, Em?”

Lunchtime shone like an oasis. Just one more pupil eviscerating Mozart and then two days of freedom.

“Sure” I said, indicating my bag. “My purse is in there, I think.”

Dom rifled through. “Can’t see it,” he said. The bag was choked with folders, sheet music, knackered tampons, failed scratchcards (better luck next time) and a puncture repair kit. General crap. I picked up the bag and expectorated it onto the sofa. My purse bounced on the floor, fluffy with the semi-nutritious crud peculiar to the creases of women’s bags. He shrugged on his shirt. “Oh, there was a message for you on the answerphone. From John Fairfax. Call him if you want a lift.”

“When’s he going?”

“Didn’t say.” He opened my purse and took out a banknote. “Gotta go. See you.”

The door slammed. Written on the pad next to the phone was *John Fairfax* and the number, in Dom’s neat loops. I dialled.

“Hello?”

“Is that Elaine? It’s Emma here.”

“Emma?”

“Patch. Petty.”

Oh.” She sounded distinctly pissed off. “John’s busy at the moment. You’ll have to call back.”

I could hear John saying “who is it?” Then Elaine must have pressed the mute button on the phone.

“Patch?”

“Hi.” I felt a bit dizzy, suddenly, and sat down. “Did she like it?”

“Sorry?”

“Elaine. The scarf.”

“Oh, yeah.” He sounded a bit hassled.

“Dom said you were going down to Redwater this weekend.”

“Tonight” he said. “Latish.”

I thought quickly. I was going to catch the train tomorrow morning (travelling on a Friday was extortionate) but this evening would give me more time with Francesca. "Great" I said.

"I'll collect you at seven."

I looked at my watch. Half one. "Thanks. And thanks for letting me bend your ear the other evening. You make a great agony uncle."

John humphed.

I could hear Elaine. "John, I'm waiting."

"You'd better go," I said.

I heard Elaine again. She sounded cross. "You haven't even got your shoes on."

"This evening."

"Okay. Seven?"

I waited until he put the phone down and then phoned Francesca, who said she could hardly wait, and neither could Emil.

At six o'clock, I ran myself a full, wincingly-hot bath and sat in it while I used Dominic's shaving mirror to inspect my shiny face for blackheads. I stared disconsolately at my boringly brown hair and wondered idly if it might suit me a few shades lighter. A soft, honey brown, perhaps? Dark blonde? Then I remembered my black eyebrows. Fucking ridiculous idea. I dumped a fistful of violet bathsalts that Agi had sent me into the water and immediately wished I hadn't. Some sort of chemical reaction seemed to have started.

"Emma?" Dom was banging on the door.

"It's open."

He squinted as his face met the steam. "Have you been using flyspray?" The sides of the plastic bath grumbled as I sat up in the beetroot-coloured water. "Aren't you ready yet?"

Shit. The gig. "Oh God, I completely forgot. John offered to take me to Francesca's this evening." I could see I had disappointed him. "Dom, give me the phone. I'll try and get out of it."

"Don't worry," he said quietly. "It's just that I would have liked someone to be there."

I thought how much nicer Dom was than me. I would have been furious with myself. Then I had an inspiration. "I know. Why don't you ask Nerissa?"

Dom looked at his shoes.

"Go on" I said. "She's lovely."

"It sounds a bit desperate."

"Just phone her."

He went out and came back, five minutes later, smiling. "She was really pleased" he said, flattered.

As he left, he shouted "don't forget Sunday."

Sunday? Sunday. Dom's big night. Someone from a record label was coming. I promised faithfully that I'd be there, and asked him to leave details by the phone.

"You ready?" John asked, as I opened the front door. I could hear the car's engine was still running. He looked stressed as he picked up my rucksack.

"It's okay, I can take that" I said, but he had already set off for the car. I pulled the front door to behind me and followed him. There was someone in the passenger seat.

"Elaine's coming down for the weekend too."

"Great" I said, nodding at her. "Hi, Elaine."

"John, we're late."

I shoved my rucksack on the back seat and slid myself along beside it. "How are you?" I asked politely.

"Fine," she said, inspecting her pink fingernails.

"How's the fitness farm?"

Elaine didn't answer. Instead, she turned to John. "Have you called Hugh?" She sounded bored.

"Yes."

There was a cutesy-humanoid air freshener dangling from the rear view mirror. Its arms were outstretched. *Big Hugs* it said. I stared at it hard, to see if I could make it spontaneously combust. John put his foot on the accelerator and the car stalled. Elaine gazed out of the window, breathing audibly. John started the engine again and we joined the painful crawl in the High Street

"If we'd left this afternoon like I said -" Elaine began.

"- Well, we didn't" John interrupted. He braked a little hard at a T-junction, lurching us forward.

Elaine tutted. "Have you remembered the swatch books?" John pulled away without answering. She sighed. "I thought not."

There was silence for the next three miles. Eventually, John caught my eye in the rear view mirror and said, conversationally, "I was reading some stuff about the Hungarian uprising, Patch."

"Agi was running food to the revolutionaries when she was a student."

John laughed. "Your mum, a political agitator?"

"She doesn't talk about it much, but if you catch her in the right mood, she tells some great stories."

John sneezed. "That air-freshener's giving me a headache. Open the window, Elaine."

I remembered my violet bath and tried discreetly to sniff my arm. Elaine wound the window down as far as it would go and sat back. I pulled my coat around me. We were following the signs to the motorway. It was difficult to think of anything to say to break the constant silences. "I got a letter from Agi the other week." Pause. I felt as if we'd all arrived in some terrible play with John and me desperately trying to ad lib.

A few moments later, "how is she?"

"Great," I replied.

"I never met her husband" John said.

"Oh, Uncle Feri?" I smiled when I thought of him. "He's lovely. He never had kids of his own, so he spoils me rotten."

Elaine yawned.

John continued "do you think you'd ever live there again?"

I shrugged. "I've thought about it. Not while Francesca -" John nodded "- but there's nothing really keeping me here. Apart from Dominic" I added quickly.

"I'd like to visit Hungary one day."

"John, you hate holidays" said Elaine.

"I don't hate holidays, I just hate lying about doing nothing."

"I've always thought you were quite good at it."

There was another silence. Oh God. Another three hours of this.

"So" I attempted, finally. "Doing anything nice for Christmas?" It was pitiful, but the best I could manage under the circumstances.

Elaine ferreted about in the glove compartment. "John. Where are the catalogues?"

“The catalogues?”

“Kitchen catalogues.” She seeped the words slowly out of the side of her mouth.

John shrugged. “Back at your flat, I think.”

“I don’t believe it.” She groaned passionately.

I had been counting off the miles. A road sign said “Redwater - 60 miles”. As we passed the markers to a service station, Elaine said angrily, “stop the car.” John veered over the continuous line and slammed on the brakes. The car behind hooted loudly. “For God’s sake John. You’re driving like a maniac.”

John cackled demonically and Elaine looked tiredly disgusted. He hadn’t even switched the engine off when Elaine flung open her door and stomped across the car park to the Tudor-style loos. The car reverberated with the slam. It had started raining slightly. I got out and sat on the bonnet. The shiny panel buckled with a thump (shit). I stood up and it popped back. Damage, if there was any, was imperceptible. I lit a cigarette. The motorway roared steadily behind the plastic toadstools in the deserted play-area. It was freezing. I felt the heavily leaded air against my scalp with relief. ✓

John stood next to me. “I missed dinner with some friends the evening I took you to Richmond,” he said quietly. “It sparked a hell of a row, and she’s been in a mood ever since. Even the scarf didn’t raise a smile.” I could think of nothing to say. “Sorry Patch” he said. “This must be awful. Thanks for making an effort.”

I slipped into a passable replica of John’s automaton-voice: “I have been programmed to pleasure all humans, even under the most trying – trying – trying – trying –” John whopped me on the back of the head. This was my cue, as though he had suddenly freed up my stuck voice module, to complete the sentence, “– trying circumstances.” In the old days, John had played the automaton, but now he seemed glad I had thought of a way of easing the stifling mood.

John’s smile faded as Elaine stepped out of the toilets, shaking her hands crossly. I climbed in and we set off again. Nobody said anything for the rest of the journey. I pretended to be asleep.

When we drew up outside *Fallowfield*, Francesca opened the door. As I kissed her, Emil slipped between our legs and out into the drive.

“Coffee?” Francesca called over my shoulder to John.

I turned. Emil treated John to a full-blooded Dalmatian welcome. John picked up the squirming creature and carried him back towards the house, craning his head vainly to avoid

the dripping tongue. “Oh, ma petit *chou-fleur*, you English doggies are – how you say – so forward.” Dog deposited, John rubbed saliva from his face. He indicated the car with a nod. “We’d better go” and then smiled at me. “Here.” He shoved my rucksack into my arms.

Shit.

I was sitting on the bench outside Francesca’s kitchen later that evening and smoking a fag by the light of the window. I had been fiddling with the sleeper in my nose that Dom had bought me when it had worked itself loose from the hole and tinkled into the puddle at my feet.

I grabbed a torch from the shed, and shone it into the murk. I thought I could make out a faint metallic gleam, but as I scrabbled, I stirred up the sediment. Years of organic decomposition muddied the water. I’d have to wait for it to settle again. Maybe tomorrow morning, when it was light, things would be clearer.

I walked back inside and picked up the telephone.

“You have reached Dominic Mayhew and Emma Petty.” Beep.

“Dominic. Sorry about this evening. Hope it went really well. Don’t forget to let me know where your gig is on Sunday.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I terminated the message with an unconvincing “miss you” and hung up.

Chapter Twenty-Six

At three o'clock the following afternoon, I dragged Emil through the Industrial Estate, past the decomposing mattresses and heaps of crumbling hard-core. We made it to the track under the trees, and splashed through the puddles. Skeletons of leaves, as intricate as Agi's Hungarian lace mats, pierced themselves on the barbed wire and tangled themselves up in sheep's wool. Up in the woods the bracken was withered and soggy, and above, branches were bleak with abandoned nests. Emil's coat was shiny and damp. I tried to amuse myself by chucking sticks for him. He condescended to sniff at one that landed not more than two feet from him, and then simply left it where it had fallen. I stopped bothering. I wondered what John was doing now, and whether he and Elaine had made it up. I thought of John compromising himself by flirting in the repulsive way I was sure she expected of him and felt furious with him for his appalling lack of taste. I made a conscious effort to stop winding myself up.

The day had never really got off the ground. There was a kind of half-awake light, as if someone had forgotten to draw back the curtains. A heavy mist shrouded the path in front of me, but when I turned to look at where I'd come from, the way back seemed impossibly remote too.

I found myself taking the path that ran adjacent to *Woodside*. Suddenly, Emil's ears pricked up. He sniffed the air and then raced into the courtyard. There was a lot of barking and the sound of something smashing to the ground.

I heard John say "for fuck's sake, Emil."

I opened the gate and found him shaking his head, still clutching the china handle of one of the cups that I'd bought him. The rest of it lay in pieces at his feet. There were splash marks down the front of John's shirt. Emil was lapping at a pool of spilt tea.

"I thought he might have escaped again."

"No." I smiled ruefully. "Though I'm afraid it's more a case of him taking me for a walk." I knelt down to pick up the broken crockery. I was vaguely worried Emil might swallow some splinters of china.

"I'll take those," said John extending his palm.

"Thanks" I said, handing him the shards. He sighed. I noticed he looked tired.

"John, you don't seem very well. Are you okay?"

"Nothing that a shower and a shave won't cure" he grunted.

“Where’s Elaine?”

John studied his watch. “Half way to London by now, I should think.”

It was only then that I noticed the smashed tile samples, scattered catalogues and fabric swatches strewn over the driveway. “What happened?” John didn’t answer. “Is she coming back?”

He shrugged.

I scraped at the gravel with my toe-cap. “Do you want me to go?” There was silence, so I clipped the lead to Emil’s collar.

“No, Patch,” he said. “Please stay.”

We walked through into the kitchen. The make-shift breakfast table was still strewn with crumbs and crockery. In the middle of the floor lay a battered book entitled *Men who are Unable to Commit, and the Women who Love Them*.

“Elaine’s,” he said.

“Right.”

He picked it up and placed it carefully on the table.

“Want to talk?”

John didn’t say anything, just stared out of the window.

I gazed along the lawn, down to the woods at the bottom of the garden, and to *Grimes Pots* beyond. “I used to love coming down here to stay with you,” I said eventually.

“We had some laughs, didn’t we?”

I smiled.

“You were a great kid, Patch,” said John. We walked through the back door and onto the terrace. “Still are, actually.”

“Hardly a kid” I humphed, kicking a broken flowerpot. There were a few scattered gardening labels: *Love-in-a-Mist* ... *Semi shade* ... *Stargazer* ... *Half-hardy* ... *Bleeding Heart* ... *Tender Perennial* ... The raised flower beds were bare earth apart from a couple of twiggy lavender bushes and fiercely pruned roses. I thought of another night, all those years ago, when we’d stood there, looking out over Redwater. “Do you remember the evening you picked me and Dawn up from the pub?”

John smiled. “You were so pissed you constituted a fire-hazard.

“I chucked up on your script.”

John squatted down in front of a failed shrub, caught by the frost and, after a moment's consideration, yanked it up and flung it on the compost-heap. "*Farewell to Summer*. God, that was shit. You were a discerning critic."

We walked down the path, towards the greenhouse. The whole garden was in winter coma. Bald espaliered fruit trees wired against the wall.

"You were really good to me, John."

"It wasn't hard." He kissed the top of my head.

"I'm really glad we found one other again," I said, smiling up at him. The blueness of his eyes made me breathless.

Reaching out, John plucked a wisp of straw from my hair and ran it through his fingers. "Patch," he mumbled, "I'm no good at relationships. I always fuck them up." He looked utterly miserable.

"Don't we all?" I said. Tears pricked my eyelids. I turned quickly before he could see them. "I ought to go and check on Francesca," I mumbled.

"Patch - ?"

"See you." I didn't dare say anything else. He'd guess.

Back at *Fallowfield*, at lunch simmered on the hob, I remembered my nose-ring. Now that it was light, I might even find the bloody thing. I felt the lump in my nostril. How long would it be before the hole sealed up and rendered me once again intacta? I didn't know if I could face going through the whole uncomfortable piercing again. I'd nearly fainted when I'd first had it done, and hadn't been entirely sure the bloke knew what he was up to.

I opened the door. Last night's rain had made the puddles run into one another, confusing everything. The breeze ruffled the surface of the water, breaking up the sunlight and spilling it across the stones. I bent over and peered at the bed of rich beech leaves. The water gave them lustre. I hesitated in disturbing them. Then I noticed a flash of something. I scrabbled and pulled out a pair of old barbecue tongs. The things we leave behind.

I stood up and pictured someone finding my sleeper, many years from now. Would they ponder on its provenance? I sighed. In all probability, it would just corrode unnoticed.

My sleeve was soggy. I walked back into the kitchen and started dishing up.

“Patch” said Francesca after lunch. “There’s an envelope on the dining table. Would you bring it here, please?” She sounded strangely formal.

I had washed up, packed my rucksack and was waiting for a taxi to take me down to the station. Francesca’s face was puffy and round. I wondered if it was something to do with her medication. I hated leaving her.

She didn’t take the envelope I proffered. “Open it.”

Inside was a cheque. Five thousand quid. I blinked. “Oh no, Francesca” I said, shaking my head, half-smiling, troubled, as if this was some sort of game.

“Patch” she sighed. “Don’t make this difficult.”

She was muttering something about me getting the money anyway. I tried not to listen.

The clock was ticking the minutes by. The fire was spitting. Ash. Dust on picture frames. The powder on butterflies’ wings. Nothing seemed lovely any more.

“Take it, Patch. Don’t be silly.”

I leaned my head against the beam across the fireplace and studied the furnace. A sliver of kindling curled up. According to an urban myth, the heat of cremation made corpses sit bolt upright. My minicab pulled up in the driveway.

“I don’t want your money” I said, and then realised how rude I must have sounded. I’d been caught off guard.

There was a knock on the door.

“Have fun with it,” she said.

It was a dreary six o’clock when I got back to London. No sign of Dominic. No note. The car was gone. I dumped my bags. The answerphone was flashing reproachfully. Five messages. There was me, twice. Dominic had obviously not got my messages. A cancellation of one of next week’s piano lessons – how many orthodontist’s appointments can a nine-year-old have? Dawn, asking me if I wanted to help with the Youth Group outing next Saturday. Francesca, telling me how much she had enjoyed my visit.

“It would be so good to see you again soon.”

Her slurred appeal tugged at something inside me. Guilt? Love? I shrugged. The two were fairly interchangeable. I checked the post. Two ominous looking envelopes for Dominic, and a letter from the bank for me. They, at least, weren't a problem anymore. Some half-formed notion niggled in the back of my mind that by paying the cheque into my account I would be somehow accelerating Francesca's death. I felt hot and a bit sick.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Monday morning. Roger was standing at the drinks machine, whistling tunelessly as he inserted change into the slot. The machine squirted steaming brown liquid all over the plastic window behind which a cup should have dropped to catch it. A puddle quickly spread across the floor. We both stepped backwards.

“Hello there, Emma” he said, chirpily.

“Blimey, Rog” I said. “Don’t tell me. The Directorate have been fired and we’ve all had pay rises.”

He really did smile, then. “Even better” he said.

From down the corridor came the familiar Monday morning shriek of wet trainer on industrially-polished floor tile. Someone was calling someone else a wanker.

“Go on, then” I said. “Spill the beans.”

He tried, rather unsuccessfully, not to look too smug. “How does Head of Music for Magdalen Grove High sound?”

He pronounced it Maudlin. A fee-paying girls’ school in Croydon. Discipline would be a cinch. “Nice one” I said, grinning. “When do you start?”

“After Christmas. The raise will come in handy.” He cleared his throat. “Meeta’s expecting,” he said fecundly.

“Mate” I said. “Congratulations. To both of you.”

He beamed and took a crisp white envelope from his jacket pocket. It was marked *Personnel*. He’d written the whole address. “This’ll give them something to think about” he said and practically skipped down the corridor. I thought I caught a snatch of *Ode to Joy* before he disappeared round the corner.

At lunchtime, when I returned to the flat, my car was parked outside. I put my key in the lock and turned.

Dominic was hunched on the sofa in the sitting room, gazing into middle distance. His computer wasn’t switched on. He looked really blue. I wondered if he was pissed off because I hadn’t gone to his gig last night.

“You didn’t leave a note,” I said, defensively.

Dominic raised his head but his eyes didn't quite reach mine. "Sit down, Em. I need to talk to you."

I sat down.

"We've been together ages," he started. He didn't have to say anything else. The only thing that astonished me was that I hadn't seen it coming. "You want to call it a day," I said.

I think I must have skipped a couple of paragraphs in the speech he'd prepared, because he reddened and began foundering. "I'd like us to stay friends – that is – if you want to –"

I sounded a bit shaky when I said "I suppose I should ask if there's someone else." It came to me before I'd finished the sentence. "Nerissa."

"It's not like that," he said. "I mean – I haven't been staying with her or anything. I've been round at Mum's. Nerissa's just a friend. I didn't want to – until – I mean –"

Dominic running off with the girl next door. Right on my own doorstep, and I never even noticed. How blind could I have been? Even saying her name made him glow.

"Please don't be cross, Em."

I thought of John. "I'm not cross" I said, and meant it.

"You haven't been happy, either." Dominic being insensitive to anything that didn't need plugging in was a standard joke. It was sobering to realise that the negligence had been mine, not his. "I know I've been hopeless - not pulling my weight. But I really did mean to make a go of the music. It's just not happening."

"How was the gig?" I asked. "The bloke from the record company -"

"- never showed" said Dominic, and smiled.

"Oh shit."

He shrugged. "That's life." He handed me the folded-up piece of paper he'd been clutching. "This is for you. For the 'phone bill."

"It's alright," I said.

Dominic flattened the cheque onto the table. We both watched it slowly re-curl. "It's not alright," he said. "Please take it."

Two cheques in as many days. I supposed it was quite funny, really. Death and desertion being so lucrative. There was a familiar burning behind my eyes. I swallowed and blinked. Not yet. "I don't want it," I said, rather too emphatically. Francesca's given me some money. Quite a lot, actually - so you see, I don't need it."

The cheque had stopped furling.

"Please, Em" Dominic sat back in the chair. "I haven't ever really felt equal in all this. That's why I want you to take the money. I don't want you to think badly of me."

"I never have." Dominic didn't say anything. "I always suspected you were looking for something else," I said. I was surprised at how easily it came out.

Dominic looked astonished. "Why?"

I was a bit abashed. "You always used to point girls out and say how good they looked. You didn't say that about me."

Dominic's screwed up his forehead in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? You look great." Briefly, the sun emerged from behind the clouds and threw the old furniture into brilliant and surprising relief against the woodchip. He rubbed his eyes. "You never said anything."

I pulled at a loose thread in the sofa. "Strange, isn't it?" I said. "This is the first real talk we've had."

He looked me in the eye. "I'm really sorry."

"Stay in touch, won't you?" I said.

"Course I will. I mean it." He stood up. "Your car's outside" he said. I hauled myself out of my chair. I felt all beaten in. "I'll come back for my gear." He picked up a bag full of tapes. "Shall I call before I do?"

"Sure."

We stood, facing one another. Two years and I didn't know how to say goodbye. Should I hold out my hand? Wave him off from the front gate?

Dominic leaned forward, put his hands on my shoulders and kissed my cheek. It was the sort of gesture a brother would have made. "Thanks for everything" he said.

"Nerissa -" I started.

Dominic looked away.

"Do it properly, won't you?" I said. "I mean, flowers and things."

"I'll try," he said. He sounded rather hoarse.

I heard the front door close. The air felt strangely still. I walked into the bedroom. The jacket I had once bought Dominic was still hanging in the wardrobe, as empty as a sloughed skin. I ran the fabric through my fingers. The cotton felt cool and remote. There was still a whiff of his aftershave around the collar.

The bed smelled of him too. I stripped it and bunged the linen in the washing machine. The petrol station cactus was still on the work surface. I didn't want to throw it away, exactly, but I didn't want it, either. I took it out to the back yard and left it on the concrete. Maybe the frost would take it and spare me the dilemma.

Amazingly, it was still lunchtime. I put on my coat and just walked.

The sky was a dirty pink and the streetlamps were buzzing when I got back. The first thing I did was call Perry, an old student of mine who had just finished at music college, to ask him if he fancied doing some part-time lecturing. Then I phoned Mark, the Line Manager at work, giving him Perry's number and citing Francesca's illness as the reason for my abrupt departure. Finally, I rang my piano pupils (all five of them) and gave them a list of reputable piano teachers (of which there were many) in the area. "Indefinitely" was the word I used to all of them. It was how I felt.

The video John had given me was still in my rucksack. It struck me briefly that I hadn't thought about Tina in ages. I supposed it was because I'd found out all I could. I shook the cassette out of the cardboard case and slid it into the machine.

The first shot pans unsteadily over the view from the terrace. The river, the Redwater rooftops. It moves downward, and focuses. Tina, in a white dress and a brown leather jacket. Bare legs and feet. She gnaws at a chicken drumstick and then wipes her mouth on the back of her hand when she notices the camera's attention. Her chin is shiny with grease.

Kevin Stringer, drawing on a joint. "Smile, Kevin." He smirks. There is an amateurish tattoo on his arm.

He had one on his buttock, too. A snake. I shifted in my seat.

Skinny Dawn, her red hair flopping over one eye, puts her arms out. "Da-naa" she fanfares, self-consciously. She wants to be part of this.

Alan Gunter, pouring himself another lager.

Susan Harlow. No white in her long black hair.

The camera moves in on John.

Outside my flat, I could hear an engine revving. "Stop" someone was saying. "I've forgotten something." I reached for the remote control and pressed the pause button.

His face is fuller. He is in the process of narrowing his eyes to smile at something out of the picture. I hadn't expected him to look so young – so touchable.

I pressed play.

"Is it turned on?" I can hear Ricky saying.

"Is the red light flashing?" John's voice.

"What red light?"

There is a crackle and the picture dissolves into a fuzz of chair legs, feet, a plate full of bones.

John must be holding the camera now because I can hear him speaking in the awed tones of a natural history programme presenter. "Here we are," he says, pointing the camera at Tina, "in the habitat of the Greater-Spotted Petty ..."

"I've never had spots."

Ricky has his arm around Tina. Her hair is frantic with static. She runs her fingers through it and pouts, lip-moisteningly. A redness around her nose. Her eyes slide up over the lense to the cameraman.

The picture jerks sideways to a girl with black, goth hair, who is moodily pushing some lettuce around her plate.

"... and the Lesser-Crested Petty."

"Can't you point that thing at someone else?" I hear myself say.

There is a weird shriek from Tina, and a "said the poodle to the Great Dane" from Ricky.

I am glowering at my hands. Thinking of -?

Susan Harlow's voice. "Something's burning."

"Oh shit." The screen blurs again and there is a muffled sound of movement against the microphone, like wind on a mountain top, or someone's breath in your ear.

Ricky is flipping food over on the barbecue. "Give us a hand, Patch."

"What, to cook murdered animal? You must be joking," I hear myself say petulantly.

"This gear is really good." Stringer, looks sideways at Tina.

Dawn casts furtive glances under her fringe towards the camera.

My voice again. "Do you know how they kill them? They hang them up and put a bolt through their brains." The picture rests on Tina. "Sometimes they're not even dead."

I pressed pause again.

This is how I shall remember her from now on, I thought. An indecipherable appeal in her eyes. Horizontal lines across her face. Blips. The picture, shivering.

The rest of the tape was blank.

PART SIX

Monday 24th June 1985

John took me to the seaside today. Found this awesome crab and picked it up. It got really pissed off and waved its pincers about. I dropped it and it burrowed into the sand. Then I dug it up again. It nipped me. John told me to leave it alone. I put it back in a rockpool with lots of weed and sea-jellies or whatever they're called.

Some girls on the beach next to us kept looking at John and giggling. I said, in a loud voice "I think they fancy you, mate." John told me to shut-up and put some sun-oil on.

It was fucking roasting and I was wearing my jeans. I hadn't bought my swimming costume so I swam in my T-shirt and John's Bermudas. The water was freezing. John and I mucked about in the sea for ages, like we used to when I was a kid. Afterwards, as we lay in the sun, John asked me about Kev and then went all grown-up about male hormones and blokes getting carried away. Yawn-o-matic.

John gave me his T-shirt to wear back. It smelled really nice. Of him. He said I could keep it. I told him I'd had a magic time. He grinned for ages. I wish Tina would realise how lucky she is to have John. I'd like to marry someone like him one day.

This evening Tina seemed a bit less fucked. At least she was dressed. We chatted and tried on make-up. Afterwards, I had a bath and she washed my hair just like she used to. She kept staring at me, which felt a bit creepy. When I asked her what she was looking at she said "you know Patch, you're going to break some hearts soon." She told me I had beautiful skin. I said I wished I looked like her and Tina started giggling. Well spooky. Tears were running down her face. I wasn't sure if she was laughing or crying. I think she's a bit cracked.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I woke with my feet hanging off the edge of the sofa. It was pitch black. The draylon cushion was slimy with dribble. I was shivering, despite the fact that I still had my clothes on. The duvet had slipped off me sometime during the night. My watch said four forty-one. There seemed little point in trying to go back to sleep. I turned over and stared through the window. I thought I could detect the faintest glimmer of dawn.

I ran myself a hot bath. I scrubbed my skin with the exfoliating sponge that had once come through the letterbox as a freebie with a promotional sachet of a seminal-looking gloop. The sponge was supposed to remove the old skin and hurt a little, but left you feeling glowingly raw. I scraped the bristle off my legs with a blunt disposable razor (Dominic had taken his with him) and washed my hair twice. Once I'd got out, I stood and watched the plug-hole swallow the dead bits of me.

It didn't take me long to pack. I checked the flat one last time, finally binned the cactus and locked the door. I strapped my bike to the roof-rack with octopus-clips. On the front seat I placed my mobile, my fags and my lighter. It was too early to call Francesca, and anyway, I figured it might be nice to surprise her.

I had forgotten how much I enjoyed driving. Yesterday's clouds had lifted, and the early sun whitewashed parades of shops and offices. I fiddled with the radio and twisted the dial through the hiss. The *Classics for Everyone* channel was playing Vaughan Williams' *A Lark Ascending*. I hadn't heard it in years and didn't think I liked it anymore. I was wrong.

The London traffic was already heavy. I hummed along as the engine idled behind double-parked lorries unloading goods, surprised at my patience. I steered around a crate of overturned cabbages. Soon, signs to The West appeared. Once I was out of town, I parked in a lay-by behind a pantehnicon with *Larry's Removals (automatic insurance cover, full packing service, quick, professional and friendly)* emblazoned in lilac across the side. I bought a mug of rust-coloured tea from a fat man in a filthy vest. He smiled at me through the serving hatch of the portakabin.

A bloke with thigh-thick arms was slurping next to me. He wore just a T-shirt and didn't seem to notice the cold. "Got a light, lass?"

I reached into my pocket.

He lit the dog-end of a roll-up. "Ta. Ya movin'?"

"Yeah" I smiled

"Oxford, me" he said, "and then home to Gateshead." He indicated the lorry with a nod of his head. "All them narrow roads." His eyes, blue as chips of china, crinkled. "Five bedroom house." His tea bubbled as he sucked. "Piano on the top bloody floor an' all. Still, I'm not complaining." He tossed his cigarette end into the brambles. "Lovely day like this. I couldn't do a desk job, me."

I thought of college. The glass partitions. The view of the I.T. block from the music room. "Me neither" I said.

"Where are you goin'?"

High in the sky, a bird hit a thermal and soared. A lark ascending. "Redwater" I said.

"Never heard of it. Little place, is it?"

I nodded. "West of England."

"You've got some driving to do." He put his cup back on the serving hatch, then turned to me and smiled kindly. "Easy does it, now lassie. Good luck to you."

"Cheers."

It wasn't even nine-thirty when I joined the motorway. London, Dominic and College were fading at a rate of ninety miles an hour. I felt one-up on the day.

Buildings became fields. I passed the service station where John, Elaine and I had stopped. The plastic toadstools were already crawling with kids. I crossed the Bridge over the estuary. Three lanes turned into two, then one, and then the road started winding up through the forest.

Classics for Everyone was having a Purcell week. They were playing Dido's lament.

... *When I am laid* ...

"*am lay-ay-ay-ayed in earth*" I belted out cheerfully.

Trees hung twisted over rocks by the side of the road. Startled pheasants ran, cartoon-style for cover in the rhododendrons.

... *May my wrongs create no trouble* ...

I was approaching the *Temple of Bacchus* that John and I had visited.

... *no trouble i-i-in thy breast* ...

The car coughed. Probably some foreign body in the carburettor. It seemed to gather itself again.

... *remember me ... remember me* ...

Shit.

I twisted the ignition-key back and forth while free-wheeling down the hill. The result was a strange metallic scraping. I steered the silent car into the same lay-by John and I had parked in. I was about five miles outside Redwater.

... but a-a-a-a-ah, forget my fate ...

I'd cancelled my membership of a breakdown service last summer, when things had become a bit tight. I hadn't renewed it. Dominic had been using the bloody car. I looked at the dashboard. The ignition was off and the fuel gauge still said full. That was when I remembered what Dominic had said. "Petrol gauge is knackered."

... remember me ... the singer wailed.

"Oh fuck off." I killed the radio. I needed to find a service station and didn't think I'd passed one. I surveyed the countryside, sat on the picnic seat and tapped John's mobile number into my phone.

Twenty minutes later, John's car slid in behind mine. It had barely stopped when the passenger door opened.

"Yoo-hoo. We're here" bellowed a voice even more plummy than Francesca's.

A tall, slightly scary looking woman was waving furiously. She strode across the grass like a country squire. "You poor darling" she boomed emphatically, indicating the car. "Auto trouble?!" Everything she said sounded as if it needed an exclamation mark.

I wiped my hand on my jeans. "Emma Petty."

She pumped my arm almost out of its socket. "Delighted!" Her name was Phyllida. "Call me Philly. Everyone does. And my husband -" she turned to where a rather slight man was taking a petrol can out of John's boot. "- Hugh!" she admonished. "Put that down and say hello."

Hugh obeyed and waded through the grass towards me. He was slightly shorter than his wife and, I thought, a little younger. Late forties perhaps. "Hugh Searle-Baker," he said, shaking my hand.

"Very pleased to meet you," I said. I peered around at my car. John must have taken the keys from the ignition because he was already emptying the can into the tank. "I'm really, really sorry about this," I said.

"Nonsense" said Philly. "You've done us all a favour. A mercy mission always works up such an appetite. Have you eaten?"

I thought for a moment. "Actually" I said honestly. "I'm starving."

"That's the spirit." She took a mobile phone from her pocket.

I turned to Hugh. "Are you friends of John?" I vaguely remembered John and Francesca discussing these two.

"Known each other years. We drove down from London on Sunday. Stunning part of the world. We're over at *Castle Court*. Superb game. Do you shoot?"

I felt a bit fazed. "Not exactly" I mumbled.

John was screwing the lid back on the petrol can.

"I demand to speak to the maitre d'" Philly was yelling into the receiver. "Well, I'm telling you now! Four, not three."

Hugh pretended not to hear. "John's been on our books for the last ten years," he said.

I must have frowned.

"I'm his agent," he smiled.

Philly continued yelling into the phone "I don't care if you're expecting Ali Baba and the forty thieves!"

I suddenly realised I'd interrupted a business-meeting and felt incredibly uncool.

"At last" Philly groaned, snapping her mobile shut and slipping it into her pocket.

John was standing next to me. He indicated the car. "What's with all the gear?"

I felt embarrassed. "It's a long story. I'm going to stay with Francesca. Until ... for a while."

"Does she know?"

"Not yet."

He seemed to want me to say more, but I felt uncomfortable going into the details with everyone else looking on. He handed me the keys. "See if it works." He kissed me lightly. "Nice to see you, by the way."

My hand flew up to my hot cheek. "You too."

"Emma is joining us for lunch," Philly announced.

"Great," said John.

Philly strode towards my car. "She and I will travel together."

I moved the crap from the passenger seat, uncovering a stain that somehow looked worse than usual and we moved off in convoy, down the hill. There was still a silvering of frost under the trees.

“Well! Isn’t this grand?” said Philly. “Oh, bunnies, look.” I caught a flash of white tails through a gate. “I feel as if we’re pals already,” she continued. “I’ve heard *all* about you.”

“What, from John?”

Philly shook her head. “Francesca. She and I go back to the Dark Ages. We attended school together.” Sheep, dozing at the side of the road, raised their heads as we passed. On the horizon, I could make out the imposing outline of *Packwyck Castle*. Philly continued, “actually, we met John through Francesca. She *insisted* we put him on our books. She was right, of course. John is frightfully good.”

“The Searle-Baker Agency,” I said, slowly. “Is it your company?”

“Good grief, no” she said. “Hugh’s the business-head.” I glanced over at her. There was a surprisingly shrewd gleam in her eye. “Francesca says you’ve been very kind to her,” continued Philly. “Poor old girl. Dreadfully bad luck.”

“I wish there was something more I could do.”

Philly nodded sympathetically. I found myself telling her about my split with Dominic.

“You’re not the only ones,” she said, finally. “John and Elaine, too. Must be something in the water.”

“What?” A pheasant crashed out from the undergrowth and zig-zagged brainlessly in front of the car. I lurched us to a standstill. There was a squeal of tyres from behind.

“Dear God!” shrieked Philly, who had twisted around in her seat and was gesticulating wildly through the rear window. “Brakes, John!” She seemed oblivious to the fact that I had nearly caused an accident.

“Do you think I got him?” I said, as she settled back down.

“He’s right there, on the verge.” I caught a flash of retreating tail feathers. We moved off again. “Did you ever meet Elaine?” asked Philly.

I changed up a gear noisily.

“Fitness Farms,” Philly went on. “Such tiresome places.”

We left my car off at *Woodside*, then all piled in the back of John’s for the drive to the restaurant.

Apart from the stuffed foxes’ heads that stared down from the walls, *Castle Court* was pretty nice. It was a real castle that had been turned into a hotel and hyper-starred restaurant. The bar was already half full. My heart sank when I saw a carcass rotating slowly in front of

an open fire. Places like this usually did crap veggie food. Soggy quiche. A ginger cat was curled up on the chair next to the fire. A black and white one on the windowsill smugly contemplated the patrons. She'd be eating from the same menu but wouldn't have to pay for it.

"Oh, kittys" exploded Philly. "Mummy's babies." She lurched and tripped on a padded footrest. There was a flash of fur as the cats made a bid for the 'staff only' door.

"But Mummy loves you ... "

"Cats always hate her," said Hugh grimly. "You'd think she'd learn."

The wine list covered three pages. We would have needed Francesca. Over lunch, John, Hugh and Philly gossiped interminably about people I'd never heard of, but they were very kind. Philly occasionally turned to me and asked something she knew I knew the answer to, and Hugh enquired constantly if my meal was alright.

John looked completely relaxed as he discussed a contract. This was the first time I'd seen him in work-mode. He was convincing and impressively low-key. No jokes or face-pulling here.

After lunch we moved through into the bar. The ginger cat had steelier nerves than the black and white. It ignored Philly's entreaties, ("Silkentine babeling" whatever that meant) and jumped onto my lap, giving me a brief course of acupuncture. I ruffled it under the chin and it roared contentedly.

My belly was full. My cheeks were pink from the wine. I was happily knackered. The wild flowers on the wallpaper started to spin.

"Patch? Patch?"

I grumbled, sleepily.

"Time to go."

"What?" I opened my eyes. John was shaking me gently. The bar was empty. The fire was mostly ash. No cat on my lap, just a few ginger hairs. "Oh God," I mumbled.

Philly hooted. "Hugh has this effect on everyone. I'm married to a soporific. Well done, John. You stayed the course."

Hugh was talking to the barmaid. "Superb meal" I heard him say. "Do you shoot?" She yawned.

We crunched across the gravel towards the car park.

"Did I snore?" I whispered to John. The sun sinking. There were reds and oranges overhead. The ivy that covered the castle rustled.

"Not much" he whispered back.

"Sorry."

In the distance, a peacock's eerie cry.

"You smiled a lot. Must have been dreaming nice things."

"I can't remember."

"John, you hunk, pucker up" commanded Philly, as she collided with a parked car.

"Whoops" she shrieked. "Topsy-Gypsy!"

I turned to Hugh. "Thank you for lunch and everything."

"A real pleasure" he said.

I caught myself saying "superb meal" and hoped he didn't think I was taking the piss.

"Emma, darling" said Philly. "Come and see us. I insist. Get your man here to bring you to London." I must have coloured. "Oh gracious me, am I matchmaking?"

"For God's sake, Philly," Hugh hissed as he tugged her towards the car. "I'll call you, John."

A large bird strolled across the lawn. "Oh peacocks!" screamed Philly. "Delicious!"

Hugh shoved her into the car, slamming the door. He didn't seem to notice that the seatbelt was jammed and dangled outside. Philly was trying vainly to put it on as they tore off.

"Well?" John said.

I smiled. "I think they're fab."

"So do I."

Back at *Woodside*, we made some coffee and took it through to the sitting room. The room was still completely bare of furniture. Flexes hung out of holes in the walls. The wooden floor was splattered with paint. John knelt in front of the inglenook, uncharacteristically quiet as he screwed up some newspaper, criss-crossed some kindling and then dumped a few logs on. He took some matches from the grate. I watched the blue flame chase the newsprint.

A travel-rug flew through the air.

"I'm afraid it's not very comfortable," John said. He seemed a little awkward. He spread the rug out on the stone floor in front of the grate. "Have a seat." He didn't sit down himself. Cradling his coffee, he wandered over to the window and stared out. "Patch?" He beckoned to me, his forefinger over his lips. I stood up and walked over to the window. Not twenty feet away, in the dusk, I could make out the delicate form of a deer. My lips made a silent 'o'. "She's been here before" he murmured. "But never this close."

I held my breath as it lifted its elusive head and sniffed the air. I thought, just for a split second, of Tina.

A crack, as loud as a rifle report, made me turn towards the constellation of sparks that was settling on the rug.

"Bloody chestnut logs" John grumbled, stamping about on the smouldering rug.

When I next looked out through the window, there were only bare branches in the rising mist. "Magic" I said. John smiled. I hadn't used the word in fifteen years.

"Do you remember our day on the beach?" he said.

I nodded.

"You spent ages poking about the rockpools." He took a slurp of coffee.

"I found a crab," I said. "It nipped me."

"It was about two inches wide" he laughed, and then was quiet.

I hovered on the brink of a question. "Philly told me about you and Elaine."

John placed his empty cup on the windowsill. "Yeah" he said. He was gazing out at the moon rising over the trees. "I heard about you and Dominic too. Are you surviving?"

I nodded and placed my cup next to his.

"You must be exhausted," he said.

"I'm fine."

John put his arms around me. His embrace was gentle: no pressure, just heat. His quick breath surprised me. I pulled him closer.

"Patch?" he asked, softly.

I reached up and touched his face.

He smiled. "You're lovely."

"You too."

His first kiss was no more than a whisper. Then his arms tightened. I closed my eyes as I felt his lips on my face, my hair, my neck.

His hands were shaking as he fumbled with a button on my shirt. Eventually he said, “you do it.”

I thought, suddenly, of Elaine, perfect in lycra, and panicked. “John – I – ”

“Hey, it’s alright,” he said, lowering his hands.

The fire had taken and coloured the empty walls. “I – I’m not very good at this sort of thing. And I’m wearing my worst knickers.”

We both giggled a little awkwardly.

“I’ll turn round,” he said.

“Thanks.”

There was a thudding in my throat as I faced the wall. I chucked my shirt and bra into the corner, gripped the elastic of my knickers and pushed them and my jeans down to my ankles. I lifted a foot. The leg pulled inside out. I hadn’t taken off my shoes. Fuck. I trod on the crotch of my trousers and raised my knees higher and higher like a demented dressage pony.

“Patch?”

“Don’t watch – ouch.”

He picked me up, dumped me on the rug and yanked. Something ripped and he toppled backwards, swearing. One of my shoes was still on. I kicked it off.

And then he was next to me. His eyes looked black in the firelight. His finger skimmed my hipbone. “You’re beautiful,” he said.

I wound my arms around his neck.

“Oh God, I’m burning.” I sit up suddenly.

John is lying in the sand with his arm over his face. “Well go for a swim.”

“The water’s cold.”

“It’s fine once you’re in.”

I pull my T-shirt over my knees and don’t move.

John scrabbles for the cream with his left hand and chucks it at me. “You’d better put some of this on, then.”

Further down the beach, two seagulls are scrapping over a dead crab. The tide is in. John’s skin is already gleaming in the sun. There is a tuft of damp, black hair under his armpit. He has a white scar, about the size of my thumb, halfway down his ribs. He isn’t fat. At all.

He shifts slightly, opens one eye and catches me staring. "Patch, about Stringer."

"Oh, here we go" I say, rudely. I squeeze out a coin-sized dollop and rub it into my legs. "What about him?" The sand in the cream scratches.

"He's a bit older than you."

"So?"

John sits up too, takes a swig of water from a bottle, and passes it to me. "Look" he says. "I'm sure you've had the birds and bees talk." I try to think of something sarcastic to say, but before I can, he continues "and if you haven't, for God's sake speak to Tina about it."

"I knew all that crap when I was eight" I say. I am pleased with how bored I sound.

There is silence for a moment. John pours water over his head and rubs it into his face. He looks cute, a bit like my rabbit used to when she washed. "Stringer's a bloke -" he says.

"Hadn't noticed."

He ignores me. "- And sometimes blokes find it difficult to stop."

I scoop up a fistful of sand and watch it run through my fingers. Fragments of old shell. "Is that it?" I say.

He sighs.

Flat clouds float like unexplored islands on the line between the horizon and the sea.

"I'm fucking roasting." I stand up and point to where the sun is sparkling on the water. "Coming?"

Afterwards, John lifted his head and grinned. He was puffing. His jeans were still rucked around his thighs.

Elation bubbled inside me. I untangled my fists from the damp hair at his nape and skidded my palms down his back. "It's a bit like swimming, isn't it?" I whispered. A bead of sweat from the end of his nose landed on my lip. I could taste his saltiness. "Say something, John."

"Like what?"

"I don't know; a funny voice or a bit of Shakespeare."

"I'd rather do this." He kissed the pulse at the base of my neck. The buckle on his belt clinked as he shifted slightly.

"Don't move," I said. I liked having him there. His weight.

“You can hardly breath, Patch.”

I laughed. “I don’t care.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"... and I'll wipe away those precious tears.

Angel, now you're in my arms ..."

I rolled over. The bed felt hard. Unfamiliar.

"... Let me thrill you with my -"

A nerve-shredding whizz from some way beneath me made my teeth vibrate. I groaned as I opened my eyes. Then I saw daylight on the oak beams, the bare floorboards - and remembered.

The noise stopped.

Late last night, we'd climbed the stairs. John had joked about having dismissed the servants for the night, before tugging me down onto the bed.

"... darling let me make you mine, once more ..."

Through the bedroom door came the sound of a clarinet. A rallentando of mawkish strings. *"That was The Sid Astoria Ensemble with a delicious arrangement of Moonstruck Melody."*

John walked in carrying a cup and clutching a pile of papers. I shifted over and he sat next to me. "That's what I love about the country" he sighed; "the smell of tile-adhesive, the scream of power-tools..."

"Hey, it's an improvement on the radio."

"I know," he said and adopted his DJ-voice. "This is *Brain-Death FM*, with *Honey, Help Me Open a Vein*." He was already dressed. He looked gorgeous. I was suddenly aware that I hadn't even brushed my teeth and pulled myself upright, tucking the duvet under my armpits.

"Patch." He handed me a cup. "I'm taking Francesca to see her solicitor this morning."

"This is Bobby Cantabile" The announcer interrupted, over the song's introduction, *"with Let's Make it Yesterday Again."*

"And then I've got to go to London."

"Right." I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"For a few days, I'm afraid."

Downstairs, something clattered on the stone floor and someone said "bugger."

The coffee stung my lips as I took a swig. "What's the time now?"

“Half ten.”

“Shit.” I put my cup down.

“What’s the problem?”

It was another fine day. A small brown bird was tickling the bare branches of a tree outside the window. I sat back. “There isn’t one, really” I said. “It’s just that I’m used to having to get up for something.” He stroked the back of my neck and I closed my eyes.

“... *how long can this thing last? ...*”

He was quiet for a moment. “Any plans?”

“I was going to take the time to think things over. You know – jobs – stuff like that.”

“No hurry.”

I noticed my clothes from yesterday had been piled neatly in the corner. My laundry-grey knickers were still poking out of my jeans. John saw me looking. I went a bit pink.

“I can lend you a T-shirt if you want.”

“Thanks” I said, pretending I didn’t remember having the entire contents of my wardrobe in the car.

John looked at his watch and got to his feet. “*Arivaderci, Signora*. Fuck, I’m really late.”

“... *This is Memory FM Golden Hour...*”

I pushed back the duvet and stumbled as little as I tried to stand. He caught me. His hands were warm. “Ouch. I’m a bit stiff,” I said.

“I’ll call you,” said John, kissing me.

“... *bringing you all your favourite songs ...*”

“Bye” I said into his shoulder.

Once I’d heard him leave, I had a luke-warm shower, dressed, smiled self-consciously at the guys working on the kitchen and clambered into my car.

The radio had warned of clouds later on, but now was intensely blue. The morning was warm through the frosty windscreen. The forest flashed by, russet and gorse.

I stopped at the petrol station on the crossroads, turned the ignition off and opened the door. Something weird had happened to me. I was all seized up. My legs, as unwieldy as someone else’s, refused to perform. I hauled them out manually onto the forecourt, filled up the tank and staggered through the automatic doors.

“She’s really let herself go,” said a school-mistressy type who was leaning over the counter, gripping a tartan-coated Yorkshire Terrier around its girth.

The woman behind the till leaned across conspiratorially. "Walking in here, cool as a cucumber" she whispered. "As if we hadn't guessed."

God, even my jaw ached. I idled in front of the magazine rack. *Get Stuffed* was one of the features. I investigated further. Recipes for jacket potatoes. *Five different fillings you and your man will love.*

The Yorkshire Terrier yapped. "At her age you'd think she'd know better -" the woman behind the till raised her voice. "- Are you alright, love?"

I peered over the Travel Sweets display. She was talking to me. I shoved the magazine back into the rack next to *Racing Pigeon Selects Winning Lottery Numbers* and *Milkman Hubby Banned From Whistling* and waddled forward. That was when I caught a glimpse of myself in the promotional mirrored clock next to the fags and saw the chafing around my mouth. John's stubbly chin. I hoped to God it hadn't looked this bad when I'd said goodbye to him.

"Which pump, love?" she said, indicating the forecourt with a nod of her head.

"Number one." A couple of days, John had said. I wondered if the redness would be gone by the time he got back.

"Nasty windburn."

I put my hand up to my chin. She knows, I panicked.

"Probably this cold snap we're having."

"Vaseline" said the woman with the Yorkshire Terrier.

"Have you got any?" I asked, sounding absurdly guilty and a bit desperate.

"Over there. Next to the toothbrushes."

I selected the largest pot and paid.

Back in the car, I swivelled the rear view mirror and smeared the stuff liberally over my lower face. The gloss finish made the eruption look positively leprous. I found an old tissue at the bottom of my bag and wiped away as much of the crap as I could. Bad to worse. I spent another five minutes picking off my mint-green beard.

Once I was back in Redwater, I passed the bottom of the road that led up to Dawn's housing estate. I remembered my not returning her telephone call. On the spur of the moment, I did a U-turn, parked and knocked on the door. She wouldn't care how I looked.

I heard footsteps down the hallway, and saw Dawn's fuzzy outline through the textured glass. "Hi" she exclaimed as she saw me. There was a dusting of flour on her cheek. She was wearing a large PVC apron. *Cooking excuses*, it listed on the front. *I) it's*

rare, not underdone 2) the recipe book had a printing error 3) it's supposed to be crunchy, and so it continued until 10) *Better wash up!* I wondered if Neville had bought it for her.

"Your poor face. What have you done?"

"Long story" I said, putting my hand over my mouth.

We walked through to the kitchen. There was the smell of baking. On the hob were two trays full of cooling sausage rolls. There was a pile of ingredients on the work surface, two greased pyrex dishes and a large lump of pastry.

"Blimey, Dawn" I said.

"Don't mind me" she laughed. "The Action Committee are meeting here this evening" she explained. "And I've had to spend the morning reading to Mrs Currie from the sheltered accommodation. Cataracts and gangrene. I'm a bit behind. Cuppa?"

"Thanks. Dawn," I said, "if this isn't convenient I can come back -"

"Oh, you know me, Patch. Always got time for a chat."

A little girl was sitting at Dawn's kitchen table, making dough shapes, covering them entirely in raspberry jam and sticking them onto a greased baking sheet. *Bible Gems for Children* was open next to her.

"This is Gemma," said Dawn. "I look after her sometimes when her Mummy's at work, don't I, petal?" The little girl made no response and continued smearing the grey pastry with jam. Dawn lowered her voice to a whisper. "Single mum. Father ran off with her best friend."

"Hello Gemma," I said.

"Do you want to see my verruca?"

I grinned. "Yes, please."

Gemma slipped her sock off and bent her foot back so I could see the underside. She peeled off a large plaster.

"Urghhh" I gasped, theatrically.

Gemma laughed, delighted. "Aunty Dawn put some cream on it." She picked at the yellowish lump with her fingernail.

"That was nice of her." Gemma smoothed the plaster back and continued kneading her pastry. "How's Neville?"

Dawn sighed. "Fine. At a conference."

"My verruca tastes yukky."

"Gemma, leave it alone, there's a good girl."

Sorry I didn't return your call," I said.

"Oh, never mind. I'm sure you're busy."

I sat down. "Oh, Dawn. Such a lot has happened." I told her about Dominic. About chucking everything in and leaving the flat. About coming down to look after Francesca.

About –

"- John?" she said blankly. "John Fairfax?"

I nodded, hand over my cracked mouth, looking at her, hardly daring to say anything, expecting her to laugh – be astonished – something.

"But -" she frowned.

My smile faded. "What?" I said.

She pursed her lips and started to flatten the pastry with the rolling pin.

"*Mary and Martha*" read Gemma, quietly, from her book. "*Mary and Martha were sisters.*"

Dawn humphed. "Don't you think it's a bit funny? Your sister's boyfriend?"

Gemma turned the page. "*One day Jesus went to see them. Martha had a lot of work to do.*" She turned the page again. "*Martha cooked and baked and cleaned.*"

"Dawn, that was years ago."

She was silent as she laid the pastry over the pyrex dishes, pressed it down firmly and sliced off the untidy edges with a knife. "Patch" she said, quietly, "I know these days open marriages and living together don't mean much, but I'm afraid I don't go along with it. If you ever ask Jesus to come into your life you'll know what I mean."

"But -"

She said, a little coldly "I hope it'll all turn out alright for you."

"*Martha was cross with Mary. Martha had done all the work, while Mary had en – en –*"

"Enjoyed" Dawn prompted, without a smile.

"*'Joyed herself. Martha wanted to –*"

"Sweetpea" said Dawn. "Later."

I rubbed my forehead. "Come off it," I said. "This is me speaking. Can't you leave God out of it for a moment?"

Dawn stripped Clingfilm from a hunk of cheese and started rubbing it up and down the grater. "I think you're laying yourself wide open, Patch. A man like him's bound to be able to pick and choose."

““Master” said Martha. “It is not fair - ””

Dawn turned around sharply. “- Gemma. Go and play.”

The rash around my mouth prickled. My thighs ached dully.

“Mary chose to listen to the Word of God.” Gemma shut the book.

I never drank the cup of tea that she made for me. I left abruptly and rudely, vowing to have as little to do with her from now on as possible. I decided that Dawn was seriously fucked.

As I climbed back into my loaded-up car, I remembered that Francesca used to hide a spare key to *Fallowfield* in the shed. She still did. I found it hanging from a concealed nail. Emil dribbled over me as I let myself in. I dumped my bike in the garage and took my suitcases up to my room. I went into the bathroom to study myself in the mirror. The line of my throat. The look of myself under John’s T-Shirt. I ran my index finger over the rash on my chin. He’d said I was beautiful. I smiled.

I remembered his pretend-simpleness as I’d tried to teach him a few words of Hungarian – he’d lumbered around like a well-natured gibbon, jibbering Hungarian obscenities. My face had ached with laughing. The companionable silences, the gentle conversations. I’d told him what had happened with Dominic. He told me about Elaine. It was just after John had called it a day with her, that I’d last seen him at *Woodside*, standing in a sea of shattered tile-remains.

“I felt bad about it,” he said. “Still do. She’s a nice girl.”

“Did you love her?”

He sighed. “She was together. Kind. I thought that was what I wanted.”

I’d nuzzled my head into the crook of his neck. “What made you finish it?”

“What do you think?” he said, kissing the top of my head. He’d paused. “I’m forty-two, Patch. Is it a problem?”

“I don’t give a fuck. Do you?”

He’d kissed me again.

I looked away from the mirror, still smiling. Once I’d put my clothes in the drawers and stacked my suitcases up on top of the wardrobe, I went down to make myself a cup of tea. I opened the kitchen door. “Bloody hell, Emil.” The floor was strewn with shredded newspaper. Emil was pretending to be asleep in his basket. Incriminating, soggy scraps still clung to his muzzle. He opened one eye and thumped his tail on the floor. “Bad dog.” He yawned.

I fetched the dustpan from the cupboard under the stairs and started to sweep up. Meaningless combinations littered the floor: the Prime-Minister's wife, toothmarks across her face, but still smiling ... a headless footballer scoring a goal ... four hands holding a giant cheque for a million pounds ... an earlobe ... designer-sunglasses (one lens only) ... a scrap of Mediterranean yacht ...

"Hmm. Brown or blue, Patch?" Tina starts snipping out the paper eyes along dotted, cut-here ✂ - lines.

We're sitting, cross-legged, on the floor. The gas fire is turned up high. It is dark outside, even though only late afternoon. The path to Tina and John's flat is icy.

"You're ripping it" I shriek.

"Alright, alright." She chucks the scissors down. "Keep your knickers dry." She skims the comic across the patterned carpet.

Create the perfect boyfriend encourages the back page of *Denim Girl*. *Your very own, cut-out-and-keep hunk*. The page displays a selection of facial features, cropped from photographs of pop and film idols. Underneath is a dotted, blank ovoid, bracketed by two line-drawn ears.

I am ten years old, staying with Tina and John while Agi is in hospital, having her womb removed. Now I'll never have another brother or sister.

"There." I position the eyes under the straight fringe I have selected and glue them into place.

Tina stands up to look in the mirror. "I wonder if I'm done yet" she muses. She is wearing a towel turban. Underneath, the contents of the *Scandic-Blonde* bottle on the sideboard are transforming her brown hair. "God, this stuff stinks." She sits down again.

"Can I have a look yet?"

"Ten more minutes."

"Will you do mine, afterwards?" I am gluing a mouth from the *boyish*-column to the paper face.

"You must be joking; Agi would go nuts. Again." She says the last word under her breath.

"It's not fair" I moan. I say that a lot, these days.

"It's not fair" Tina repeats in gormless imitation.

I study the noses. Disembodied, none of them looks very promising. *Rugged* - flared nostrils. *Classic* - huge and bent. I try them in turns and decide on *Cute*. I like the result.

"Aaah" says Tina, peering over my shoulder. "He looks quite sweet."

I hear the front door open. "John" I yell, chucking down the magazine. In the hallway I fling myself at him.

He nearly topples over. "Howdy-do, pardner" he says, pulling a chipmunk face, and then he picks me up and swings me round. "Alright, buster?"

Francesca returned a couple of hours later. She wasn't surprised to see me. She seemed quite chirpy. Her chin twitched slightly.

"You look great," I said, as I hugged her. Her hair was immaculate. Her nails were painted a delicate shade of shell pink. She had rather heavier foundation on than normal. She smelled of *Jacques*, the Salon. "New dress as well?"

"Oh, this?" she said, pleased I'd noticed.

Francesca went out to the kitchen and returned, clutching a bottle of Dom Perignon. She sat down next to me. "Let's celebrate." She handed me the champagne and fetched two flutes.

"What's the occasion?"

"Oh -" Francesca fluttered her fingers. "You choose."

I peeled off the foil, untwisted the wire, and started easing the cork out.

"Is your car alright now?" she asked.

"Er - yes, thanks."

"What a stroke of luck that John was around."

I nodded.

Francesca crossed her legs casually. "Do make him shave that dreadful stubble, won't you?" She grinned. "Or you'll have buy a yashmak."

Bang. The cork ricocheted off the ceiling. Emil freaked. Froth fizzed over my wrist and dripped onto the carpet. "Shit" I said, squirming with laughter. "He told you?"

I poured and Francesca raised her glass. She was smiling broadly. "To my two favourite people. What a marvellous idea."

"You think so?"

“Inspired.”

We clinked.

“What did he say?”

“Oh” said Francesca airily. “This and that.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” I said.

“No need.”

Emil pawed the sofa. I lifted him up next to me and stroked his ears. “You don’t think it’s wrong, do you? Because of Tina?”

Francesca tutted kindly. “Darling, you do insist on making the oddest problems for yourself. Of course it’s not wrong. You’re simply perfect together.” She tipped the last of her champagne down her throat and put the glass back on the table. “So, come on, then. Spill the beans.”

“Francesca!” I protested. I rested my head on the back of the sofa and grinned up at the ceiling. The champagne had completely taken away any sour taste in my mouth that I might have had since leaving Dawn’s. “What do you want to know?”

“Absolutely everything” she said. “In the minutest detail.”

At seven o’clock, Francesca was dozing on the sofa under a blanket that I’d found in a cupboard upstairs when the telephone rang.

“Patch?”

I smiled into the receiver. “Hello, handsome.” I could hear the chaos of London traffic in the background. “I was just thinking about you” I whispered.

“Pardon?” The background roar of traffic was deafening, even on my end of the line. “Patch, can you hear me? Bloody mobile.”

The sitting-room clock started chiming. I raised my voice a little, aware of Francesca asleep in her armchair. “I’m already missing you a bit.”

I could hear John was smiling as he said, “I miss you too.”

I made a grumbling sound. “This is crap. When are you coming back?”

“Saturday morning.”

“For fuck’s sake; that’s ages.”

“I know; two days.”

“Two and a bit days.”

I heard a handbrake being pulled in and someone say “six pounds twenty, Guv.”

“Patch” said John, “I’ll call you again soon.”

I paused, wanting to say something, but not exactly sure what.

“Wanna receipt, Guv?”

“Saturday then,” I said eventually.

Chapter Thirty

On Thursday morning, Francesca was dictating a shopping list: "Paté. Bread. Tonic water. Dog food. The dried sort. Nothing special. It's wasted on him."

"Dog food" I muttered as I scribbled.

"Pop into the chemists, would you, darling. May I?" She took my pen and wrote down the name of a cosmetic cream and its French manufacturer. "It's wonderful. Made from the glands of the -" she saw the look on my face "- well, it doesn't matter. Could you get some? I'm running low." She handed me back the pen. "Fruit" she continued.

"Whatever takes your fancy."

"What do you like?" I asked.

"Oh - anything" said Francesca, waving her hand, and then, rather firmly, "not grapes." I remembered the pile of ubiquitous invalid fruit I had discovered rotting in a bowl in the kitchen and binned. "Everyone brings me grapes." She paused. "Hmm. Vegetarian meals. Get some fresh spinach and some ricotta. White wine. Oyster mushrooms. Cream. I'm sure we can do something with that. A leg of lamb, if you can bear to. John likes it."

"Anything else?"

Francesca was silent for a moment. "Sit down, please."

I slid myself behind the kitchen table, rested my chin in my hands and my elbows on the morning papers.

"Darling. The money I gave you was a gift," she said. "I had no idea you would do anything this drastic."

"I know," I said.

She paused, and then she touched my cheek. "Thank you Patch."

Emil put a paw on my leg and gazed up adoringly. I reached down and stroked his head. "Please don't say that. I just want to be with you, that's all."

"I'm so glad you have John. He'll make you happy, Patch."

I smiled.

Francesca looked irresolute for a moment and then said "darling, can you pass me my purse?"

"It's okay." I scraped my chair back and stood up. "I've been to the cashpoint."

"I haven't finished yet," said Francesca. "My purse."

I fetched it, sat down and slid it across the table to her.

She took my hand quite calmly, though her eye was twitching. Someone who didn't know better might have thought she was about to share a joke with me.

"I'm sorry, Patch, but it's important you know this." She handed me a business card. "All arranged and paid for. You don't need to do a thing except telephone."

Renton and Sons. Funeral Directors. I turned it face down onto the table.

On Friday evening, after dinner, Francesca and I walked through into the sitting room. "Thank you, darling," she said, as she settled into her armchair and leaned her head back on the antimacassar. "What an interesting recipe."

A simple, warming hotpot – wholesome and delicious, the blurb in *Cooking on a Shoestring* had said. It had taken me practically the entire afternoon and the result looked nothing like the dish in the illustration. The cobbler top had oozed a slimy discharge. The turnips and carrots that mooched underneath in the fuscous liquid were still stubbornly crunchy. I'd made skipfuls of the bloody stuff. Even Emil wouldn't touch it.

It was a wet night. The rain crackled against the leaded lights like the final groove of a record. Francesca sighed. Her tea was lurching dangerously in her lap so I squatted before her and began to peel her fingers from the cup. She opened one eye and protested "darling, I haven't finished."

"Sorry."

She indicated the piano. "Will you play something?"

"Any requests?"

She shook her head. "Just something I'll like." She closed her eyes again.

I rifled through the sheet music in the piano stool, found Book One of Grieg's *Lyric Suites*. *Butterfly* was one of the pieces in the collection. I had played it in my Academy recital. I wondered if I still remembered it. I smoothed the pages open on the stand and began playing. When I had finished, Francesca clapped, delighted. "Encore! Bravo!"

"Bloody hell, I thought you were a CD!"

I swivelled round. John was smiling in the doorway and clapping. I shoved the piano stool aside and flung my arms around his neck. He kissed my ear. "I'd no idea you were so good."

"Should practice more," I said, breathlessly. "Middle section was all over the place."

“Darling, you were fabulous,” gushed Francesca. “I must ask Margot and Hubert Fotheringay if you can give a soiree at the vicarage.” Oh fuck. “John, what a lovely surprise; you’re back early.”

“My last meeting blew me out,” said John.

“Have you eaten?” asked Francesca.

I panicked slightly; the winter vegetable shitpot. Under no circumstances. “There’s cheese and biscuits,” I said, quickly.

“No thanks,” he said. “Patch, coming back to *Woodside*?”

I dashed upstairs, grabbed my toothbrush and a change of clothes. When I came back down, Francesca was yawning. “*A bientot*, my treasures.” She stood up and winked. “I shan’t be expecting you for breakfast.”

I felt absurdly shy as John and I drove up the track. It was chucking it down. We hopped through large puddles to the front door. When John flicked the light switch in the hall, there was a pinging sound from a lightbulb, and, barely had the place flashed into bluish light, it was plunged into darkness again. “Shit,” said John.

“I’ve got my lighter,” I said cheerily. “Where’re the candles?”

“God knows.” He thought for a moment. “Patch, let’s get the hell out of here. I’ve got a much better idea. Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

He took my hand.

Even out of season, there was only one vacancy at *Castle Court*: the *Saladin* room.

“John, isn’t it a bit expensive?”

“For you, my treasure” he said in a Sheik-of-Araby voice “the beard of Mohammed is not too great a prize.”

“I don’t want the beard of Mohammed.”

“Just as well, lass” he said, switching to Lancastrian. “Wouldn’t suit you.”

As John signed in, I noticed an elderly couple in the lobby turn and stare at us. The receptionist smiled and handed him the keys.

John took my hand. The man across the lobby stood up and walked over to us. "Er, excuse me," he said, blinking behind his glasses. He looked a little flushed around the collar. "My wife and I were wondering – we've probably made a mistake - are you John Fairfax?"

John smiled. "Nice to be recognised."

The old man turned even more beetroot. "I – er – that is – we thought you were splendid in *Forgotten Valley*. Didn't miss an episode."

"Great script" John said with kind modesty.

"Would you mind ...?" He handed John a magazine and a chewed biro.

"Be happy to," said John. "May I ask your names?"

To Denis and Ethel Beatty, best wishes. John's signature looked well-practised.

We left the man staring at the battered listings-magazine and beaming.

"Blimey, John," I said, as we climbed the stairs. "A household name."

"I hardly think so," he grinned, a little sheepishly.

"Does that sort of thing happen to you a lot?"

"Wish it did."

I could tell he was pleased. He unlocked the door to our room and pushed it open. The hotel-flier suggested Richard the Lionheart might once have stayed at *Castle Court* (I smiled to think of him having collected his keys from the receptionist). All the rooms had mediaeval names that reflected this: *Blondel, Templar, Leopold*.

Our room – *Saladin* - was a louche orgy of ruches and swags. The wallpaper was heraldic and amongst its cod-coats of arms there were scenes of hunting and patient-looking women at spinning-wheels. In the middle of the room stood a huge four-poster, scattered with tasselled cushions. It had a muslin, tented canopy printed with illuminated manuscript.

John phoned room service for a bottle of champagne. A few moments later, a discreet knock indicated that it had been left in a cooler outside the door.

He filled our glasses. As we drank, he talked about his trip to London – an audition he'd been to, the possibility of a part in a TV Dickens adaptation, an actress friend of his who was expecting a baby, a director he'd met for lunch. He'd stayed with Hugh and Philly. Once the bottle was empty, he put his arms around my waist and kissed me.

As we undressed, John quipped gently at the OTT-décor in the room and once I was next to him on the bed, he smiled; "I've missed you."

I caught my breath as I studied the effect of him against the damask: the tiny creases around his eyes; the stubble on his chin; his thick shoulders; the dark hair on his chest. I

fanned my hand out over his stomach and felt his heartbeat accelerate. “You look like a movie star,” I said.

He reached up and stroked my face, then rolled over and pushed me gently back against the silk cushions. I felt his lips on my neck, and then my breasts. I shuddered and arched my back. He travelled lower, leaving a hot trail of kisses. I gasped, suddenly, and raised my knees.

Later, as we made love, I called his name. The illuminated letters on the canopy above us glowed vermilion and gold. I felt as if I was floating.

His eyes were very blue. “I love you, Patch.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered.

Afterwards, with the sound of our cries still ringing in my ears, I was astonished to find that my cheeks were wet.

John ordered more champagne.

Steam was rising off the bath water. The mirrored walls were misted up and the whole place smelled rich and exotic. *Castle-Court* had provided an assortment of bath oils. I had chosen the ones I thought smelt nicest.

I knelt between John’s knees, held the sponge over his head and squeezed.

He snorted. The water was sheering over the top of the bath and onto the tiles. There was foam everywhere. I squeezed some shampoo onto my palm, rubbed my hands together and scuffed my fingertips against his scalp.

He sniffed. “What the hell is this stuff?”

“Herbal Experience with extract of avocado,” I intoned in a South-London, senior-stylist voice. I wiped the froth from his eyelids with my thumbs. “Doing anything nice this weekend, love?” I reached behind him for the showerhead.

“Bloody hell, Patch, it’s freezing.”

“Whoops. Sorry” I said, adjusting the taps. “Better?”

He nodded. The water darkened his hair and sent drifts of suds sliding down his back. I rinsed until his hair squeaked.

Without warning he snatched the shower from me. The warm water hit me full on. “Stop it. It’s going up my nose” I spluttered.

He turned the flow against his own face, screwed up his eyes and made funny puffing noises as he spat the water out. I got a sudden picture of how he must have looked as a kid, and went a bit wobbly inside. He turned the taps off.

I dabbed John's face with a towel, then traced the scar on the side of his ribs with my finger. "How did you do this? Was it *the* fight? The one you got sent down for?"

He nodded.

I ran my finger along the length of it. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"Fuck." I paused. "The other guy – he was alright in the end, wasn't he?"

"Luckily. Hospital said afterwards that a centimetre either way and ..." he trailed off. "Pub Brawl" he said, eventually, and then smiled ruefully. "Some bloke whose bird I'd nicked."

"Who was she?"

"Eh? Oh, Sandra Something."

I was silent for a moment, then touched the wonky bridge of his nose. "This?"

He smiled. "Now that was really terrible."

My eyes widened.

"Fell off my push bike."

"Did it hurt?"

He pulled a face. "Blood everywhere. I yelled the place down." I must have looked pensive. "What are you thinking?"

"What was she like, John?" I asked. "The girl you told me about - the one who was married?"

He frowned. "Patch, it was years ago. Does it really matter?" I was quiet for a moment, and then he sighed. "Funny. Kind. Never achieved her potential. I learned a lot from her."

"Did you see her for long?"

He shook his head. "She called it a day after Tina went missing."

"Were you very upset?"

John smiled. "For a while. But she was right, of course. Our friendship was the thing worth having."

"Are you still in touch?"

John scratched his eyebrow. "Kind of."

“I’d like to meet her.” I took a swig of champagne. “Why wouldn’t she leave her husband?”

“She loved him.”

I frowned. “She couldn’t have done or she wouldn’t have been seeing you.”

John stretched for the shampoo and picked the showerhead up from its cradle. “Your turn now.” I spun round and leaned back against him. There were warm trickles down my face and neck. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes.

“How did it go again?” said John, kissing my ear. “Doing anything nice at the weekend?”

PART SEVEN

Tuesday 25th June 1985

Went down to the fairground today to see if I could find Kev, but he wasn't there. When I got back, John was out. Phoned Francesca. She wasn't in, either.

This evening, John took me along to Tina's gig. They were playing in a tent in a farmer's field. I met Steve Purley from Abyss and he gave me his autograph. John introduced me to a director he knew who was from Hungary so I said Szia. Hogy vagy? And he replied Csókolom Köszönöm jól. Then we chatted a bit about Hungary and where Agi was from and how long he'd lived here. Steve and the people he was talking to looked round and said "what are they speaking – Russian?" When John said Hungarian they were all really impressed, but the best thing was that John looked dead proud. Now I'm glad that Agi isn't English. When I go home, I will stop refusing to talk to her in Hungarian and try and get better at it because it's nice to be able to speak a language other people can't.

When Tina came on stage she looked amazing. She was wearing this stiff, pink mini-dress. You could see her knickers. She'd back-combed her hair so it stuck out and she had loads of black eyeliner on. She wasn't wearing any shoes.

Then it all started going wrong. At first I thought Tina's microphone was on the blink, cos you couldn't really hear her. She forgot the words. After the song, Tina spoke into the microphone and tried to make a joke of it. Her speech was a bit slurred, and no one laughed, so she just counted in the next song, but it wasn't together and they had two false starts before it got going. Tina was staggering a bit around the stage. Someone started a slow hand-clap. Others started leaving. It was fucking terrible. The set was cut short. They were only on stage for about 15 minutes.

Afterwards, Tina was in a right fucking state, giving the sound guy a bollocking, saying that she wasn't getting anything from the monitors at all. The bloke said they were exactly the same level as they were at the soundcheck. Then Susan said there was nothing wrong with them and that Tina couldn't hear anything because she was pissed. Tina told her to fuck off. She tried to light a cigarette the wrong way round. John grabbed my hand and took me for a veggie-burger.

Later, I saw Phil Jacobs cuddling Tina behind the tent. She was bawling like crazy. He told John he'd take her back to Woodside. John didn't say anything on the way home.

Chapter Thirty-One

Over the next week, John was a frequent visitor to *Fallowfield*. Francesca remarked, more than once, how wonderful it was to have acquired a family out of nowhere. Regardless of her illness, I'd rarely seen her so happy.

I spent the days at *Fallowfield* with Francesca and the nights at *Woodside* with John. Good times. Only the strength of my feelings towards him worried me. Sometimes, as I watched him sleep, I'd experience a pang of something so fierce it left me feeling out of control in a way I found unsettling. Try as I might, I couldn't shake off the notion that something was bound to come along and spoil it. It had to.

As time went on I became concerned that my worries were beginning to take substance. John could be subdued - the tiniest bit irritable; nothing major, just an occasional shortness in the way he answered me. At times he would break off, mid conversation and stare into space. Whenever I asked him what the matter was, he would wrap me in his arms, kiss me, do a funny voice or tell a joke, and assure me that everything was fine. I kept persuading myself to relax and take him at his word, but I couldn't help remembering what Dawn had said – *a man like him's bound to be able to pick and choose*. Since when had I cared about what Dawn Potts thought? But then again ...

Late on Saturday evening, at *Woodside*, I shivered as I pushed the door to the bedroom with my knee. "God, it's freezing. Is the heating fucked?"

John was sitting up in bed with a book on his lap. "Chilly?" he grinned, and lifted the duvet. "Hop in." There was something different about him.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," I said.

"I don't," he snapped automatically, and then smiled. "Just for reading sometimes." He took them off and folded them.

"Put them on again" I said, looking at him expectantly.

He carefully positioned the maroon, leather case on the bedside cabinet next to him. "I can see you without them."

"Go on."

He huffed, reaching for them and put them on. He turned to me, pulling a village-idiot face and pushing his tongue into his lower lip. "What'th wong with thwem?"

"Nothing. They make you look - "

His face became suddenly austere. "Distinguished, I know. Can I take them off now?"

" - pretty nice, actually, when you don't pull stupid faces." I climbed into bed next to him. "What are you reading?"

He passed me a battered hardback. *Myth and Ritual around the World*. I flicked through. "Bloody hell - that must really hurt."

"It's a fertility rite."

I thought for a moment, gazing at the savagely adorned warriors. "I wonder if you could get it on the NHS."

John stared at me. "Do you ever stop talking, Patch?"

"Sometimes." I pulled the duvet around me. "I don't bore you, do I?" I asked, quietly.

He flopped backwards and started making theatrically loud snoring noises.

"John, I'm being serious."

He pulled me down next to him. "Bore me?" he said. "Never." He reached out and switched off the bedside lamp.

The next morning, I was sitting on the floor of Francesca's bedroom, arms around my legs, mutinous chin on my knees.

"Do we have to do this?" I said.

The sky was teeming. Fat tadpoles of rain wriggled down the glass. Francesca continued to hum something from *Madame Butterfly* as she flicked through her wardrobe.

"Ah" she said, pulling yet another garment out. "Freddie bought this back from Okinawa for me." She was clutching a pink kimono. The heavy fabric was faded and a little worn in places but the embroidery was extraordinary. She handed it to me. "You can use it when you take a shower. Your dressing gown's falling apart."

"Francesca, it should be hanging in a museum, not a bathroom."

She laid it carefully on top of the "Patch" pile on the bed and continued flicking through the coat hangers. "No" I protested.

She held out a fur jacket. "Darling? It's mink – is that a problem?"

"You are joking," I said.

She sighed, replaced it, then started grappling for the edge of the bed. I leapt to my feet and steadied her as she fell backwards. I shoved all the clothes to one side and lifted her feet before going downstairs to get her a glass of water.

“Just a bit giddy, that’s all,” she said, when I returned. “Don’t go away.”

I stroked the fringe off her forehead, still a little out of breath and held the glass to her lips. She sipped and then lay back.

“Patch?” She pointed towards the wooden pagoda, which had stood in her bedroom for as long as I could remember. I lifted it carefully. It was surprisingly heavy. Francesca ran her hand over the tiny balustraded walkways.

“It’s lovely,” I said.

“It comes apart.”

I lifted away the curved roof. Inside were spiralling steps. I took off the next section, and the next, until the bed was covered in a perfectly proportioned gradation of octagons. Inside the largest section, a carved dragon yawned.

“He was such a clever boy,” she said.

“Freddie?”

Francesca shook her head. “Freddie was no good with his hands. Here.” She picked up the base and turned it over. Inlaid in mother-of-pearl were the words *To Francesca, Happy Birthday, love from John* and the date: *10th December 1984*.

Francesca said, “a copy of the one at Kew. I’d taken him to see the Palm House. The pagoda is a perfect replica, except for the dragon. That was John’s idea. Such patience.”

I picked up the pieces and marvelled. I thought of John’s big, clumsy-looking hands.

“A complete surprise” said Francesca.

That afternoon, while Francesca was asleep, I took Emil on a walk up to *Woodside* to see John. He was at the far end of the garden, shovelling bucketfuls of crap into a churning cement mixer. It had stopped raining, but the earth was still tacky. The grass squelched under my feet.

“Hello, stranger,” I said.

John pulled a lever and dolloped the contents of the mixer inside a large rectangular frame. There was a pebble-dash effect down one side of his face. His hair was matted. His hands were caked. He caught my neck in the crook of his elbow and gave me a kiss.

“Want some help?” I said, grabbing the rake, which lay on the mud like a cartoon accident waiting to happen.

He frowned. “You’re standing on my spirit-level.”

“Whoops.” I lifted my foot. The little glass bubble had broken. “Sorry.”

I started to level out the heavy grey stuff out from the mound in the middle of the frame and into the corners.

“Is Francesca alright?” John sank his shovel into the sack of sand and ballast.

“Fine. Asleep” I said. I leaned over to push the cement into the far corner and nearly toppled in.

“Patch, please.”

“Am I doing it wrong?” I puffed. It was actually quite hard work. John didn’t answer. “Francesca showed me the pagoda you made.”

He grunted.

“Lovely birthday present.”

“Shit” he said. The shovel had missed the rotating ‘o’ of the mixer. Sand and pebble mix splatted in the mud. John slashed yet another sack of cement with a knife.

“Have we nearly finished it?” I asked.

“Not even halfway yet.”

“God.” My arms were killing me. “What are we building – the pyramids?”

“Foundations” he said, pulling the handle again. I tightrope-walked on the edge of the frame, wobbling precariously. “Patch, why don’t you check the phone messages or something?”

“But nobody’s called.”

John heaved the straining mixer over again. “You’re getting covered in crap.”

I looked down. The bottoms of my jeans were splattered with caramel-coloured muck. “It’s okay,” I said. “They’re Dominic’s. Foundations for what?”

“Shed.”

“Big shed.”

No response.

“It looks huge. What have you got underneath there? A body?” I giggled alone.

Behind John's head, the fields were breathing out a low mist. The sky was the same colour as the setting concrete.

"Francesca's birthday soon," I said.

"I know," said John.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Redwater was suffering a spell of freak weather. Rain, wind, sunshine, hail – the whole meteorological repertoire, sometimes in the space of just an hour or two. On Saturday, John and I had planned a trip into town for some groceries for Francesca. It was bucketing. Even the brief dash from the front door to the car had soaked us. The sky was sagging over the grey hills in the distance. The windscreen was alive with rain and already misting over. There was a blurred lunchtime glow coming from the sitting room window as we left *Fallowfield*. Francesca had friends visiting: an old pal of Freddie's from the diplomatic service, and his wife, who said 'capital' a lot and kept referring to Bunty and Pongo. The stories they told involved rambling digressions and exchanges in which dates and countries were furiously disputed. I amused myself by pondering on the possibility that Bunty and Pongo weren't, in fact, people at all, but codewords, and Francesca's friends, secret agents. Perhaps there was classified information concealed in their interminable reminiscing. It was an inspired idea for a cover. All you'd have to say is "do you remember Cairo, nineteen-fifty four?" or "don't be silly, darling, it was Nigel" and people would be practically flinging themselves under buses to avoid you.

"You're quiet today," I said, as John drove.

"Lot on my plate at the moment. Loads of work coming up," he said, eventually.

"Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"Sorry? Oh, yeah. Yes, it is." He turned the de-mister on. It made a protesting noise, as if something was stuck. He swore and turned it off again. "There's a chamois in the glove compartment."

I opened it. Oily rags, a box of drill bits, sweet wrappers, energy tablets (relics from Elaine?), petrol receipts. An official-looking envelope. I frowned at it. *Jonathan Fairfax*. More surprises. "Is that really your name? Jonathan?"

John grimaced.

I studied his face as I assimilated the new information. "Don't you like it?" I asked.

"Not really."

I rubbed the windscreen. Redwater, through the smears, looked lifeless. We pulled out onto the main road. As we idled at the traffic lights, I tried again. "John –"

"Hmm?"

“You hardly talk about yourself.” The closed-down cinema still carried posters for a Martial Arts Film. I thought of Ricky Chesney, and what he’d said about the way Tina had treated John: *he couldn’t take a piss without her wanting to know about it* and didn’t continue.

The rain subsided. A sharp gust sent the petrol station’s revolving sign crashing across the forecourt. As we pulled away from the traffic lights, a yellow rain-hat cart-wheeled across the zebra crossing and a little girl shot out in front of us to try and catch it. Her mother panicked her name. John slammed on the brakes. *Turkey-bonanza* screamed a notice in a butcher’s shop window.

We moved off, but in seconds were stationary again. The town centre was heaving. There was a line of traffic cones and a truck inching forward. Someone was hanging plastic reindeer on cables that zig-zagged across the road. “Can you believe it? On a bloody Saturday” fumed John, and beeped his horn. “God, I hate shopping.” I remembered the fun we’d had shopping for Elaine’s scarf and bit my lip.

High Street windows were blotchy with spray-snow. In front of the supermarket, a mechanical Mary rocked the baby Jesus. People with maroon sashes were collecting for the blind. They had congregated beside a bleak looking poster – *See Amid The Winter Snow – She wishes she could*. A brass band braced itself next to the cenotaph. *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*. People ran past, turning up their collars against the rain. It was too cold to stop and listen.

At last we left town, passed the new housing estate and then joined the dual carriageway, veering to avoid a mangled fox. The sky was brown, the light, strangely artificial. Little pips of ice landed on the windscreen. John flicked the switch and the wipers whined.

“I know I keep saying the wrong things” I blurted out, finally.

“Sorry?” He frowned.

“I just don’t want to blow anything.”

He turned the car suddenly, up a lane, and drove a few hundred yards until we found a space in front of a farm gate, and parked. He switched off the engine and leaned over to kiss me.

I pushed him away and shook my head. “I know I’m pissing you off. Tell me why.”

“Come off it, Patch.” He unclipped his seatbelt.

“Please don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.”

John was silent. Hail rattled on the sunroof. One of the seals was knackered. There was a slow drip-drip onto the carpet. I began to wish I hadn't started this.

Finally he said "it's not you." He sighed. "It's me."

I rubbed a hole in the misty glass. Sheep were huddling miserably in a corner of the field. I remembered John saying of my sister, *we had been happy together in the beginning*. I remembered the book of Elaine's I'd seen at *Woodside: Men Who Are Unable To Commit And The Women Who Love Them*. John's own words: *I'm no good at relationships*. I began to cry. Great, gasping sobs.

"Oh, fuck," said John and wrapped his arms around me. "I'm sorry, Patch."

"Do you want to finish it?" I choked, in a last-ditch attempt at dignity. "If you do, then just say so –"

"- of course not –"

"- because I'd rather know. I can't bear this."

"It's alright," he said softly, stroking my hair. "Hey, it's alright."

"I feel like I'm losing you all over again."

"You're not losing me. Please stop crying."

"Well, what is it then?" I sobbed. "Tell me." The hail eased and then stopped. Sharp gusts of wind sent purple clouds scudding across the sky. A small copse of trees on the brow of a hill shivered in the wind.

"Everything's fine." John stared out across khaki fields.

I suddenly started undoing my seatbelt, wrestled with the door and got out of the car. Slipping and sliding on the hailstones, which were melting onto the tarmac, I set off towards where I thought *Fallowfield* might be.

"Patch," John shouted. "Patch!"

"What?" I turned round and yelled back, angrily, "what are you trying to do to me?"

A miraculous finger of sunlight reached through the clouds. It dabbed the grey river and made it gleam. His voice, when he called again, faltered slightly. "Patch – will you marry me?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

Dominic and I had been in regular contact since we'd parted. Without the burden of our relationship hanging over us, I'd found him kind, practical and supportive. The sullenness had completely disappeared from his demeanour. I'd told him to take his time finding somewhere else to live. I was going to be in Redwater for a while and would feel happier knowing that someone was taking care of the flat. I refused the rent that Dominic offered me.

Later that week, when Dominic phoned, just for a chat, I told him my news. He was genuinely delighted for me and wished us both well.

"Where will you live?"

"I don't know," I said. "In Redwater for a while, I expect, and then after that - well, we haven't really discussed that far ahead."

"What will you do with the flat?"

"Sell it, probably," I said.

"Er - Em," said Dominic, clearing his throat. "Can me and Nerissa have first refusal? I mean, we'll give you a good price and everything. It would be ideal for us, and it's right next to the sandwich bar."

After discussing the matter with John, I phoned Dominic back. "Fine," I said. "Get some valuations. Oh, and the stuff that I've left there - keep what you want and chuck out the rest. Except the piano. Can you hang onto it for a bit until I work out what to do with it?"

It was lunchtime, the day before Francesca's birthday. I was sitting at the small occasional table in the sitting room at Fallowfield, writing her card while she dozed in the armchair. Suddenly she sighed, still with her eyes closed, "I've got a headache."

I stood up, shook out the rug that had fallen off her lap and tucked it over her knees. "How long have you been awake?" then walked quickly back over to the table and deployed yesterday's newspaper to hide her card. The B-movie poster for *Mutant Teenage Zombies* had made me and John laugh. *Puberty is Hell!* the caption ran.

"Just drifting in and out." She rattled some pills out of a bottle.

"Drink?"

"I've got one." She picked up her glass, gulped and sat back. "Patch, darling, tell me to mind my own business, but why have you suddenly decided to hate Dawn?"

She'd twigged. Emil's walks consistently coincided with Dawn's visits. "She went a bit spooky on me" I said.

Francesca cocked her head to one side and waited. Through the window, I could see John's car pulling up. I told her about my visit to Dawn's the morning after John and I had first gone for the burn. "I thought she'd be pleased." I concluded.

"Jealousy does funny things to people" said Francesca.

"Jealousy?"

Outside, John had opened the boot and was pulling out clandestine birthday-goodies. I banged on the window and, once I'd caught his eye, gesticulated wildly for him to use the back door. He didn't cotton on so I mouthed "piss off."

"Who's that?" said Francesca, straining round.

"John." He slammed the boot. I turned back to Francesca. "Her endless preaching really gets on my tits."

"Oh, come on, Patch. Show a little tolerance," said Francesca. "Poor Dawn. She's always carried a torch for John."

"What?"

I watched John creep across the hallway, Felix-the-Cat style, wrestling a load of carrier bags. He grinned at me and then indicated, with a lot of rolling of eyes, that I should try and get Francesca upstairs for her afternoon nap. As soon as she closed the bedroom door, John and I set about the preparations. By six o'clock, I was knackered. As I was folding the final napkin, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and stooped to grab Emil's collar as he made a bid for freedom. There was a sudden gust of wind and a bang.

"Sorry about that," I said to the dazed-looking woman on the doorstep as I opened the door again. She was still holding out the box tied up with pink ribbon. John and I had ordered a Dalmatian-shaped rich fruit cake. I jammed Emil between my knees, counted out forty-five-fifty (it had better look brilliant) from my purse, and waved her van off.

Inspirations, it said on the side. *Celebration Cakes baked to your own specifications.*

Disposable party-wear and bonboniere whatever the fuck that was. I placed the box on the table. The front door slammed again, making the windows rattle.

“For God’s sake stop doing that!” Francesca sounded distinctly cross. I heard the click of her heels on the landing and pushed hard on Emil’s backside. He farted angrily. I wound the last of the tinsel around his neck.

“I can’t get a wink of sleep with that wretched –”

I let go of Emil’s collar and he shot up the stairs to greet her. John stood sweatily in the kitchen doorway, covered in flour.

For a moment Francesca didn’t say anything. She just took in the purple and orange streamers, the table set with candles and flowers. She glanced up. Strung across the room was a line of garden twine. Clothes pegs held 22 pieces of A4 paper, a letter per sheet. *HAPPY BIRTHDAY, FRANCESCA* painstakingly cut out of kitchen foil and wrapping-paper. Her mouth puckered and she sounded a bit guttural when she said, “you really shouldn’t have.”

“I know,” said John. “But we did.”

“How could we forget?” I said, clumsily glossing over the many years when I had. Francesca’s gaze rested on a pile of inexpertly but enthusiastically wrapped presents (Books mostly, and Belgian chocolates from Emil).

“So thoughtful” she murmured, and then her face screwed up.

It took Francesca three quarters of an hour to regain her equanimity and to stop crooning and tutting at all the effort we’d gone to, after which she had slipped into something pale blue and elegant. Her entrance had been impeccable. A discreet clearing of the throat at the top of the stairs. A pause and a smile before a flawless descent. A stranger might have interpreted the shake of her left hand as a theatrical flourish, attributed her unsteadiness to the height of her heels. We’d clapped.

The meal was a complete success.

“John, darling, thank heaven I taught you to cook,” said Francesca, wiping her lips on her napkin.

“I made the *paté* myself,” said John, looking, I thought, a little smug.

“Of course you did, darling. And the fillet was perfectly *au point*. Text-book.”

My usual *yuk, dead animal* comments never crossed my mind. God knows where John had got me asparagus at that time of year, but he had. The whole meal, prepared in secret, had taken him nearly two days.

Francesca turned to me. “John cooked for us all the time, when he lived here. A true virtuoso.” She straightened the knife and fork on her plate, picked a piece of stray pastry

from the tablecloth, and surreptitiously lowered her arm. I heard a doggy slurping noise from under the table.

John smiled. "It was fun. I wish I had more time now."

Francesca clicked her tongue. "Make time. You have genuine flair."

John looked pleased.

Francesca turned to me. "Patch, you must get John to make you his *Auberge en Croute* with *Pommes Dauphinoises*."

"What the fuck's that when it's at home?"

"A little corner of heaven. Maybe he'll give you a masterclass."

"But I'm crap at cooking."

"Darling, lesson one: with enough fresh cream anything's edible; and never, never ask anyone if it's alright."

"Sounds a doddle." I glanced under the table at my left hand. Wearing a ring still felt a bit funny.

John laughed. "She doesn't have to learn if she doesn't want to."

"Yes she jolly well does." Francesca looked a little pink as she held out her empty glass and slurred delicately "a little more of the *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* please, darling."

I poured her another large one, stacked the plates and dumped them in the kitchen. When I returned, she was sitting next to John and leafing through an old photograph album.

"Look Patch. This is John with his first car."

"Er – well. My first legal one, anyway."

I put my hand on John's shoulder and peered over. In the picture, he was leaning on a tatty brown estate, wearing a leather jacket.

Francesca said "I loved that car. It was so noisy I couldn't hear a word Freddie said to me. Whole days without an argument."

John stroked my hand absent-mindedly. Above Francesca's head, a woodblock-print Samurai stood, feet squarely apart, sword raised.

John said, "shall we cut the cake?"

I clutched my stomach and groaned.

"Let's have it for breakfast, then" Francesca suggested, turning to the next page. She went misty-eyed. Puppy Emil was all ears and paws. Francesca held the album out for him to have a look. He licked the cellophane. Some loose photographs spilled out onto the floor.

"I really must put these into some sort of order. Oh here. Patch, this is John building the gazebo."

John's bare back shone like teak. He was grinning round at the camera, holding a drill.

"What was that song that used to drive Freddie mad? You know, the one with all the silly voices. You played it all summer."

"*The Lost Cherries. Baby Pop My Weasel*," said John. "We bought him the single as a joke."

Francesca smiled. "He made me throw it on the fire."

"Only because you kept playing it and he couldn't get out of his wheelchair to turn it off."

"Well, it always provoked such a magnificent reaction," said Francesca, giggling, "that I had to buy another copy." She stood up. "I've still got it, somewhere."

Once Francesca had left the room I wrapped my arms around John's neck. "I'm so pleased we did this," I whispered, kissing the top of his head. "She's having a lovely time."

John pulled me down next to him and studied the ring on my finger. Candlelight danced on the facets of the stones.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

He kissed my hand. "Just glad you said yes."

Francesca bubbled as she returned with a square record case. Patch, darling, make some coffee."

In the kitchen I juggled with the espresso machine. There was a loud reggae beat coming from the sitting room. Francesca was laughing. As I waited for the coffee, my eyes drifted across her calendar. A reproduction-antique map. Oceans teeming with sea-monsters, dragons, mermaids swimming in the froth between galleons. *Jane from hospice. Meter reading. Emil to vets' for jabs – 'phone first! More logs crossed out.* I turned to the previous January. *Manicure. Lunch.* It crossed my mind briefly that she had written that before she knew, and was surprised that the handwriting didn't look somehow different.

The espresso machine stopped hissing. I put the glass jug and three coffee-cups on a tray. Even looking at the *panetone* we'd bought made me gag slightly. I left it in the kitchen.

In the sitting room John was bending over the record player. Francesca handed him another record. "Freddie liked this."

He put it on. A syrupy tenor crooning in French about autumn. It was very scratched.

"We heard it in Paris" said Francesca. "Our honeymoon. A friend of Freddie's threw a cocktail party for us. We danced on the balcony. You could see right across to the Seine."

Outside it was dark, and the wind was rising. I drew the curtains. Lichen-coloured velvet. I could hear a siren in the distance.

"I could afford beautiful clothes in those days." Francesca sipped her coffee and gazed into the fire. "Ho-hum."

I reached for the singles box and started flicking through. A label with brightly coloured swirls caught my eye. I pulled it out. *Candyfloss Dreamer*. "Blimey, Francesca" I said into the silence. "This must be a collector's item."

She took a little time to focus, but when she did, she smiled. "Oh, I remember that. Do you, John?" He frowned. She hummed a few bars. "Go on. Play it, Patch." She drained her glass. "No. Wait. I've even got the outfit." She stood up and stumbled towards the fire.

I caught her. "Careful, Francesca."

"For heaven's sake, Patch." I was startled by her sharp tone. "Stop fussing." I let go of her. She left the room.

Something caught my eye in a bowl of pot-pourri. Lying among withered petals was a peacock butterfly, its lifeless wings clasped together like hands in prayer. I remembered it flying around the room, ragged and miraculous.

"You alright?" John whispered.

It had died with its curly proboscis sticking out. I didn't want to leave it there, desiccating. Becoming dust. I picked the shred up between thumb and forefinger and flicked it on the fire. Gone. "I'm a bit scared," I said.

I didn't need to explain any more. I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "I know," he said, gently. "So am I."

"You can put it on, now, Patch" called Francesca from the top of the stairs.

The needle bounced as I dropped it. The record was warped. The stylus rose and fell as the turntable rotated.

"Are you ready for a real debutante entrance?" called Francesca.

"Oh fuck" I mouthed to John as we rushed out into the hall. She was twirling a boa crazily at the top of the stairs, her head tossed back. She wobbled. I bit my tongue.

Tearing fabric. Jangling beads. The ragged sound of snatched air.

Francesca took a tumble in her Portebello Road kaftan. She sounded like a dry branch snapping.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Go through address book.

Send letters. NB No flowers, by request. Donations instead to the Redwater Young Offenders' Rehabilitation Unit.

Funeral Directors need outfit. Pink suit? (Dry Clean first).

Cancel milk.

Inform: Registrar, Bank, Building Society.

Sort through clothes etc (which charity shop?).

Book Chequers. 12.30 onwards. Just drinks and canapés.

Tuesday. Emil - inoculations. Get Vet to check weepy eye.

Phone solicitor.

Hat?

Anything else?

Chapter Thirty-Five

The night before the funeral, in the small hours, I thought I'd heard her.

Let's celebrate.

I can't I'd said. *Tina's in trouble.* The tide was out, and we were drifting down the narrow rivulet of water, which flowed between the mudflats. Tina's limp, white hand kept breaking the surface of the water, but I couldn't reach it, no matter how hard I stretched. I noticed that Francesca was wearing an afro wig and sunglasses. *Where are you going?*

Paris, she had sniffed. *I can afford beautiful clothes there.*

How typical of her to be so discreet about her death. I could tell she knew about it and yet she referred to it so obliquely. I pushed us away from the bank.

The day dawned exceptionally fine and clear. The frost sparkled under the trees until nearly noon. I awoke early. I remember standing at the bedroom window, watching the rabbits pottering in the field behind the housing estate. The air was so still you could hear the white noise of the motorway.

Downstairs, three envelopes stared up at me from the mat. One from Agi. *Emikém,* Agi had written inside. *Really, this is very quick. Are you sure?* It took me a moment to realise she was referring to me and John. I checked the postmark. The letter had taken ten days to come from Hungary and we'd spoken in the meantime. The second envelope contained a *With Deepest Sympathy* card from Dominic and Nerissa. It had Parma violets on the front.

Thinking of you at this time,

The golden strand is broken.

We hope you'll find this heartfelt rhyme

A sympathetic token.

The thing went on for another four verses in gothic script, but I couldn't read on. I detected Nerissa's hand, but nevertheless, was touched by the gesture. The third was for Francesca. Opening her post still felt horribly presumptuous. I gritted my teeth. An invite to a charity ball. Tickets fifty quid a head, in aid of the Young Artists' Association. I propped it up against the clock on the sideboard.

I wore the green dress, which had been intended as my Christmas present. "That's nice," said John, absently, as I came downstairs.

"Francesca bought it for me," I said, and then I felt my face crease.

A large black car (a Daimler, I think) collected us from Fallowfield. Traffic parted as we slid noiselessly down the high street. I watched the world scurry beyond the glass. We got to the crematorium half an hour early. Cars from the previous funeral still choked up the turning circle and on the steps, a dribble of mourners stood around. I wasn't sure if they were from our party and found myself awkwardly avoiding eye contact. We would have needed Francesca's help to initiate the introductions.

A woman in a black pillbox hat and orange foundation waved excitedly. "John. Over here." He let go of my hand. She made a slurping noise as she kissed his cheek. "It's just ghastly, isn't it?"

I walked through into the gardens where water murmured over smooth stones in a rectangular pond. Spiders' webs glistened on the stumpy regiments of tea roses.

"Poor Francesca" I heard a voice behind me say. "It must have been terrible for her, rattling around in that damp old house. After all those years of nursing Freddie, to die with no one to take care of her -"

"- Oh, I don't think she was on her own. She had a girl living in."

"Really?"

"An au pair or something. God knows where she got hold of one at such short notice."

For a moment I felt sick. I bit my lip and wandered away from everyone towards the back of the chapel. I could hear the previous service in all its miserable detail:

In the midst of life, we are in death.

It was a cold day. Under the concrete cloisters, where some cut flowers were laid out, magpies chattered and picked at the foil that wrapped freesia stalks. *Seven for a secret never to be told.* The place was steeped in municipal serenity. I sat on a commemorative bench, lit a cigarette and eyed the chimney for signs of smoke.

... treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal ...

I thought of funeral pyres, of flaming Viking ships, of ancient antechambers stuffed with food, wine, gold, laid up for the afterlife. The closing shots of a film I'd once seen of petals floating down the Ganges. I wondered where Francesca was now and whether she was watching me. That she simply *wasn't* anymore, was a concept, like infinity, impossible to contemplate and yet all-pervading.

“There you are” said John. His feet had made barely any noise on the path. He looked uncomfortable in his suit. His hair shone in the winter sun, but his face was dry and grey. I had a premonition of how he would look when he was old. The thought was almost unbearable.

... remember what I told you. I am going away, but I will come back to you again ...

I took one long, last drag and stubbed my cigarette out in the pile of butts that littered the ground at my feet. John put his arm around me and we followed the procession through to the chapel. I was surprised by how well the organist played. Nice hymns. Hardly anyone knew them, but it didn’t really matter and I was glad that Francesca’s exit wasn’t spoiled by the awful comedy of bad music.

In his sermon, Neville listed the good causes that Francesca had supported. I hadn’t realised there were so many.

... when you did it to these my brothers you were doing it to me ...

It struck me that I never discovered whether Francesca believed in God, which was strange as we had talked so openly about so much.

... death is swallowed up in victory ...

The curtains closed around the coffin. At the end of the service, John remained after the others had gone out. He sat with his head in his hands.

“Shame there weren’t any flowers” said the querulous woman from the greengrocer’s as she limped across the foyer. I remembered queuing in her shop, two Saturdays ago. She’d been recounting details of her hip replacement to the customer in front and had narrowed her eyes at me as I tutted in exasperation. I’d been parked on a double-yellow and had only popped in on impulse - there were pomegranates in the window and I knew Francesca liked them.

We were gathering in the *Balmoral Suite* of *The Chequers* Country Club. A girl in a white dirndl and black pinafore passed around sherry and canapés. A folksy wood-burning stove had overheated the room almost unbearably. I didn’t know why Francesca had chosen this place. She’d always hated it. Her last laugh, perhaps – after all, she knew she wouldn’t be available to attend. John stood by the door to greet people I’d never met. For the first time, since I’d arrived at *Fallowfield*, I didn’t feel part of any of this. I picked up a glass of sherry and slunk over to the corner of the room.

A woman strode over to me and squinted earnestly. “Daphne, darling, how’re the boys?”

“I’m Emma,” I said.

She fumbled in her handbag for her glasses. “Oh, do excuse me, I thought you were somebody else.” She hurried towards the bar.

The room was filling up. People chatted, sipping their drinks. Occasionally a guest would drain his glass with defiant levity and pursue the *dirndl* for a top-up.

I passed the bar. “John?” I tugged at his sleeve. He continued talking earnestly to a couple of severely-dressed women. As he went on, the taller woman absently clutched the hand of her partner. “No-one understands sculpture these days – except Val here.” She gave her other half an affectionate peck.

“John.” I tugged harder this time.

He made his excuses to the two women and followed me across the foyer. “Pretty little thing” I heard one say to the other as we left.

“John, I’m going. I’ll see you back at *Woodside*.”

“But it’s hardly started.”

“Sorry.”

“Please, Patch.”

“I’ve done the important bit. But this -” I motioned around the room, “- no one needs me here.”

“I need you.” He ran a finger down my cheek. “A bit longer, at least.”

“Oh God” I sighed. “Okay.”

The sherry glasses were impertinently small. I drained another and walked over to the table where I exchanged my empty glass for a full one. I sunk that with ease, too.

“... feller ought to be horsewhipped – treating a bitch like that ...” I heard someone bark as they walked past.

People picked at the canapés I’d selected from the range that the *Chequers* offered. Lobster claws, which on closer inspection turned out to be synthetic. Crackers with absurd little asparagus spears sitting on blobs of mayonnaise. Anchovies and olives – and olives and olives. I’d tried to choose things I thought Francesca would have liked.

“God, funerals.” A girl with hair in dreads stood at my shoulder.

I remembered to smile.

“They’re getting to be a habit with me. Last month too. Boyfriend of a friend. Bike smash. Only twenty-three.”

It occurred to me that rating the tragedy of death according to age was meaningless. Nevertheless I nodded and forced myself to focus. “How did you know Francesca?” I asked.

“She was very good to me. I suppose you could call her a patron. Bought me my first kiln.”

I studied her. Square, strong hands curved around her glass. Reddy-brown dirt under her nails. I remembered the Raku-glazed vase that stood on the sideboard at *Fallowfield* and wondered if that was one of hers.

“Are you a relative?”

I shook my head. “Friend” I said, and then realised how pale that sounded. Everyone here was ‘a friend of Francesca’. “A close friend” I tried again. I was beginning to sound more and more like the other people in the room.

“What do you do?”

“Er – I’m between jobs.” I could detect the murmur of John’s voice amid the general conversation. I looked across the room. The girl in dreads followed my gaze. Her eyes settled appreciatively on his dark head. “I teach piano,” I continued. “And lecture. At a college. In London. Well, till recently.” I felt dull and insignificant.

Two suits conversed next to the leaded windows: “... last thing I heard,” sneered the taller one “he was trying his luck in the Music Business. Damned fool if you ask me.” The ice clinked in his tumbler of scotch.

God, I missed Francesca. For a split-second, I contemplated telephoning her.

“At least he hasn’t gone into teaching. That really is Last-Chance Café.”

This is how loss feels, I remembered. Bleak and irreversible.

“Sherry, ma’am?” the waitress held out the tray towards me. I stocked up on another couple of the tiny glasses.

The girl in dreads tried again. “Music College?” She smiled a big-jawed, Madonna-smile. Under any other circumstances, I would have sought out her company. She seemed a good crack. I pictured her in a bright, airy studio, seated in front of her wheel, coaxing beautiful things out of dull, red clay. I thought how John would like her.

“South London College of Media and Technology” I said. “You wouldn’t know it. Excuse me.” There was a ringing in my ears and the floor felt a bit uneven. I tried to remember how many drinks I’d had, tripped and jogged a woman’s elbow.

“Do you mind?” She reached into her jacket pocket for a handkerchief. Splashes darkened the button-front of her blouse.

“Fuck.” I heard myself gasp. “Sorry. Oh God. Too much sherry.”

She looked at me coldly. I recognised her as the woman who ran the garden centre. Done up in a skirt and blouse, she looked older than she did in wellingtons and filthy, pink tracksuit. I remembered her arriving at *Wallowfield* about a month ago with a selection of bare-rooted roses that Francesca had ordered back in the spring, before she knew anything was wrong. I’d planted them under her instruction, though by then we both knew she’d never see them bloom.

I manoeuvred my way through the crowd. Voices penetrated the general hubbub.

“... Guadeloupe, Mitzy, Guadeloupe. Went there last year. Stunning, perfectly stunning ...”

“... God, Mummy, isn’t John Fairfax an absolute dish ...”

“... wrong side of the blanket, I wouldn’t be surprised ...”

“... I still think public school does something for a boy ...”

I was beginning to feel really queasy.

“... what are these vol-au-vents filled with? It smells like cat-food ...”

I stomped, heavy-footed, towards the loos, lurched through the swing doors and locked myself into a cubicle. I slumped on the simulated-mahogany loo seat with my head between my knees. The floor tiles raced before my eyes. I tried to calculate how to keep all traces of barf off my clothes in case of emergency.

The clink and murmur of the guests grew louder as the door to the Ladies’ opened.

“Patch? Patch, love, are you alright?”

I groaned inwardly. Dawn. The last person I wanted to see right then.

Oh, come on, Patch. The closeness of Francesca’s voice in my head startled me. *Show a little tolerance.*

I unlocked the cubicle door and stumbled over to the wash basins.

Dawn’s expression fused concern with sanctity. “Dear me, bit green around the gills?” I thought of the fishy-smelling canapés and heaved slightly. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I was sweating. My mascara had run. *It Came From Beyond the Grave XXX-rated.* I used to love those awful horror movies. Death had been laughable in those days. “I’m fine,” I swallowed. It was only as I walked back into the throng of guests that I

realised I had let the toilet door swing back on her. She came out rubbing her knee. I grabbed another sherry.

Dawn was at my elbow again. "Fancy Mrs Dashwood falling downstairs like that. You must have felt awful." She clicked her tongue stoically. "Mustn't blame yourself, though. If it's going to happen ..."

I lit a cigarette.

"And a mercy to go quickly like that. It's what she would have wanted."

I remembered the paramedics struggling to fit the neck-brace. That stupid kaftan rucked about Francesca's waist. I knocked back another sherry. They were beginning to taste strangely chemical. "Dawn, could I have a moment to myself?"

"A little bird tells me you and John are tying the knot." She winked at me. "That was fast work, Patch." I hadn't rinsed my hands properly. A small rind of miniature soap caked the setting of my ring. "You'll have to start thinking about dresses." She scrutinised my face. "Peach might be nice. I'm not sure white would suit you."

"I hate wedding-dresses."

"Oh, get away" giggled Dawn. "Every girl wants to be a princess for a day." She sat down on a fake Louis XVI settee and patted the space next to her. "Come on, Patch," she smiled. "Give us a cuddle." I felt my eyes warm and buried my face in her shoulder. "Good for you, love. Just let it all out." Dawn fiddled in her bag and produced a crumpled, lilac tissue. I blew my nose loudly. "Patch, there's something I need to tell you." I was too pissed to listen properly. She started droning on apologetically about friendship. "It's about your sister." She sighed. "Patch, are you listening?"

I tried to focus. "Uh-huh."

"I didn't like to meddle, but then I thought if it was me I'd want to know."

I belched cheap sherry and sun-dried tomatoes. "Sorry."

Dawn was staring at me earnestly. "I mean, Tina had a *right* to know. About John and Mrs Dashwood."

"What about John and Francesca?"

Dawn's hand flew to her throat and she gasped a little theatrically. "Oh, Patch. Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"I'm surprised John didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

“That they were – well – lovers.”

I couldn't help it. A tear spilled over and coursed down my cheek. I dashed it away.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I shouldn't have said anything.”

“Then why the fuck did you?”

“Patch, I know you're upset –”

“- Lying bitch. Just fuck off, alright?”

Dawn suddenly became hard. “Funny,” she clucked, standing up. “People always resort to foul language when they don't like the truth.” She sneered. “But I saw them with my own eyes. John and Mrs Dashwood up against the summer house. I had my camera with me. Picture wasn't very good, but you could see what they were doing. Dirty animals.” I was afraid if I got up I'd puke. Dawn smoothed her dress down. “I put the picture in an envelope and addressed it to your sister. It was the right thing to do. You should read the Bible, Patch. Deuteronomy 23:22 - *if a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die.*” Dawn leaned down and hissed, “I wonder how long it'll be before John cheats on you.”

“I –”

Dawn was in full flow now and would not be interrupted. “- Come to think of it, you might ask him how he got rid of your sister.” Her lips tightened. “He lied to the police. I saw him in his car, following Tina, the night she disappeared.” She grabbed my arm.

“Don't touch me.” I stood up and tried to tug my arm free. “I said don't ... fucking ... touch me.” Heads turned.

“Well, they've both had their come-uppance now,” she sneered, “your sister and that toffee-nosed bitch my mother and I had to skivvy for.”

That was it. I caught her square on the jaw.

“Patch!” John stared aghast.

“You cunt,” I screamed.

There was a thrilled silence. Someone guffawed in the adjoining bar.

Dawn inspected the blood on her fingertips. I thought I detected the ghost of a smile flicker across her face.

Back at *Woodside*, I heard the front door open – then close. Footsteps up the staircase. The bedroom door opened. John didn't say anything for a moment. I was sitting on the bed, hugging my knees, leaning against the headboard. After looking at me for a moment he said "Neville's taken Dawn to hospital. You broke two of her teeth."

"Good." I wiped my nose on the back of my hand. "She's ..." *vile* was the only word I eventually came out with.

John sat heavily next to me and blinked. "Most of the guests have gone." I choked back a sob and he put his arms around me. "Tell me what happened," he said, gently.

"I love you," I whispered, holding him tightly, feeling the warmth of him. "I didn't believe her. Not a word of it."

"Come on, Patch. What did she say?"

"She said you and Francesca ... just bullshit ..." I trailed off as John pulled away and walked over to the window. His silence surprised me. "I mean - how dare she say that about you?" I went on. I was beginning to sound desperate. "It's disgusting."

"I'm not ashamed of it," said John.

The air was still and cold. I felt pissed and clammy. I pulled the bedclothes over my legs. I could smell us, sour and fragrant on the sheets.

"She was the one you told me about, wasn't she?" I said, at last. "The one who wouldn't leave her husband." The light was failing. I broke off. "I'm sorry, John. I can't cope with all this." I thought of the day at *Woodside* when we'd first made love. How lucky, clever, charmed I'd felt for once. Now I just felt stupid, like the butt of a joke I didn't fully understand.

"Patch. It was fifteen years ago. More than fifteen years."

"Did you mean for us to end up together ... or was it Francesca's idea?"

"Please –"

"I wish you'd told me."

"I didn't want to lose you, Patch."

"So you lied."

"That's not fair."

I thought of something else. Something that had seemed unthinkable this afternoon. "Dawn says you followed Tina in your car, the night she disappeared."

He was trembling. "Patch –"

"Is it true?" I whispered.

He didn't say anything.

Suddenly, I couldn't move. "So you lied to me about that, too."

"It's not what you think. I can explain."

"Please don't. I can't trust you any more."

"Patch ..." He walked towards me.

"You lied to the police – lied about my sister." I edged around the walls away from him, towards the door, startled by the sudden clarity of my thoughts. I could hardly say the words: "what happened to Tina?"

"Patch, sit down. Let's talk about this." His voice sounded hoarse.

He touched my elbow. I jumped and screamed "go to hell!"

He gripped my shoulders, spun me around to face him. There was an anger in his eyes that terrified me. Jumbled images of what must have happened to Tina flashed through my mind like the final reel of a film. John following Tina into the night to un-pick the mess their lives had become. I pictured Tina, yelling at him on a deserted cliff top. Both of their careers lay in tatters. John, unable to be with Francesca, blaming Tina for his misery. Tina, in turn, blaming John's infidelity with Francesca for hers. I imagined the spite and vitriol in what Tina must have said to him – "she's old enough to be your fucking mother" – and then I imagined John shaking and shaking her until she was finally quiet. Tears were pouring down my face. "Please," I said. "Let me go."

He dropped his hands.

I stumbled downstairs, slamming the front door. At *Fallowfield*, I filled my rucksack as quickly as I could and ran, avoiding the roads, across the muddy fields, to the train station.

Would passengers Smith, Ságvári and Petty, booked on Magyair flight number BP103 to Budapest please go immediately to Gate 12. This flight is now closing. Passengers Smith, Ságvári and Petty go immediately to Gate 12 please. Thank you.

Dawn was breaking. Through the glass, I had been staring out at the lights of the planes as they took off. I suddenly came to my senses.

I had been lucky to get this flight. Standby. I may have dozed a little during the eight hours on the seat next to the shuttered duty free shops, but mostly I just sat and watched –

departures – arrivals – departures – arrivals – (where on earth is Antigua?) from the safety of Passport Control.

Romantic Breaks. An illuminated poster showed a couple strolling through the sunny autumn of Sacre Coeur. *Remember Paris. Forget yourself.*

I stooped to pick up my rucksack and stepped onto the moving walkway.

PART EIGHT

Sunday 30th June 1985

Tina's manager, Phil Jacobs stayed last night. Don't know what time he and Tina got back. Must have been late because I didn't hear them.

Phoned Dawn this morning. When I said me and Kev were going steady, she went all sniffy. Said he was always getting off with girls at the fairground and that he was only after one thing. I said she was just jealous. She went ballistic. Called me and Tina whores. I slammed the phone down. Phil promised me free tickets to see Abyss in London next month if I stopped crying. I really hate Dawn.

Went to see Francesca. Freddie was in a bad mood. He couldn't find his Mandarin dictionary. He accused Francesca of hiding it. Francesca told me not to take any notice of him. She said he was irritable because his back was sore. She showed me some pictures of their wedding. There were real pearls in Francesca's hair. She looked like a film star. Freddie was dead handsome. Reminded me a bit of John.

When I got back to Woodside, Tina and John were fighting. Fucking hell. It was terrible. Tina was so hysterical, she could hardly speak, she just kept screaming and calling John a filthy bastard. Then she hit him. Phil pulled her off. She broke his glasses.

John took me back to Francesca's. I kept asking him what the matter was but he wouldn't say. Nobody tells me anything.

7pm. Tried to phone Tina. Again. Still no answer. Nicked a bottle of peach schnapps from Francesca's sideboard.

Had enough of this. Everyone else thinks they can throw tantrums all over the place and then treat me like a fucking kid. Well, they can just fuck off. I'm going to do what I like from now on.

My last night tonight. Haven't seen Kev for ages. Think I'll go and find him to say goodbye.

Chapter Thirty-Six

That was the last thing I wrote in my diary.

After I'd written the final entry, I told Francesca I was going to bed early. I waited until I was sure she thought I must be asleep and then opened the window, squeezing out through the teatray-sized aperture. I had hidden the schnapps-bottle in a bag I had hung around my neck, and almost throttled myself as it snagged on the window-clasp. I somehow managed to land on a galvanised metal dustbin, which toppled into a flowerbed. I checked the bag. Inexplicably, the schnapps bottle was still intact. I dusted myself down and then ran across the fields to the fairground.

At the turnstiles I looked over at the group of kids by the refreshments stall, bashing tambourines and singing *What a Friend we have in Jesus*. A fat girl in pink dungarees, strumming a guitar beamed encouragingly at me. Then, to my amazement, I noticed Dawn Potts among them, singing fervently and clutching an alligator soft-toy with *Jesus even loves me* embroidered on its back. She whooped occasionally.

Neville Cotton strode over to me. I panicked in case Stringer was watching. "Emma, praise the Lord."

I pulled away. "No thanks. I'm going to find my boyfriend." I left Neville and headed off towards the Ghost Train.

Stringer was propping up the ticket office, talking to a girl with a crap perm and making her laugh.

"Hi Kev," I said.

He couldn't have heard me because he kept on talking, so I walked up to him, puffing a cigarette, and casually put my hand on his shoulder. "You doing anything later?"

The girl stopped giggling suddenly and glared at me. "This your girlfriend, is it?" She looked me up and down, from my Goth Mohican to my buckle boots. "Not fussy are you?" She stomped off towards the dodgems.

"Karen, wait" called Stringer, but she didn't look back.

Two of the barkers nudged each other. "Oi, Stringsey" called one of them. "Does Morticia take it in the mouth?" They both started snorting and choking as if their gobs were full of marbles. It took me a moment to realise they were referring to me.

"Piss off" I said. They laughed even louder.

Stringer grabbed me by the elbow and yanked me round the back of the generator where everything stank of engine oil. “What you doing here?”

I put my arms around his neck and kissed him hard on the mouth. “Do you want to go to the cave, later?”

He didn’t kiss me back. He just stood there, stiff, with his hands down by his sides. I smiled at him up through my eyelashes, in a passable imitation of Tina. It seemed to work. He thought for a moment and then shrugged. “I’m off in half an hour. If you want to hang around.”

I sat on the grass next to the fence. My watch said ten-forty when Stringer finally came to get me. The schnapps bottle was empty by then. We headed off towards town where Stringer bought beers, fags and skins. The memory I have of falling in the sticky dust on the off-licence forecourt is, I think, from that night. Out in the open, in the picnic area next to the dual carriageway, we smoked a paranoid joint and giggled a lot. I felt light-headed as Stringer pinned me against a tree, lifted my top and pinched hard. When I tugged open his shirt and pinched him back, he’d chuckled “gagging for it, aren’t you?” and we’d clutched each other. I echoed his paroxysms of laughter, though I didn’t really understand what was so funny. The schnapps had made me unselfconscious. Adult. In control.

In the cave, we smoked some more. Soon, the rocky walls were rushing past me like runaway trains. I fixed my gaze on the tip of his reefer, watched it glow orange as he sucked. After a while I couldn’t keep my head up anymore, so I flopped the dead weight of myself back on the blanket.

Stringer smoked his reefer right down to the roach before shuffling forward to fiddle with buttons, zips, buckles. He peeled me like unripe fruit. Paralytic, I drifted.

Next thing I knew, he was naked, not smiling anymore. His penis pointed upwards, not outwards as I thought it would. He behaved as if it wasn’t there at all. I was surprised by how clumsy it all looked and thought for a moment about getting to my feet. I couldn’t. As he knelt between my knees, head bowed, I had this idea that he was going to start praying ... *for what we are about to receive* ... He raised his palm to his mouth and spat. I closed my eyes.

I woke again to feel the blunt end of something prodding into the folds of flesh between my legs. Stringer pushed. My protest was silenced by the boozy, smoky O of his mouth. My lips moved against his teeth. I could hardly breath. Buried alive. Stringer

shoved again. Something stretched. He persevered. I yelled as the obstruction finally gave and all of a sudden he was crammed up inside me. He started to move.

I don't know what I expected, really. Something different. Some feeling. Not that dry, frantic wriggle. It didn't last long. His pace quickened. He breathed in.

"Kev, please." I scuffed my heels in the earth.

He froze. His eyes widened in a parody of surprise. His mouth was open. I heard the rattle of air in his throat: God, he sounded like was dying.

Afterwards, he rolled off me and went out like a light. His hair smelled of sun and straw, like a child's. I watched the candle burn to darkness.

The next thing I remember, it was morning. I came to, rigid with cold and parched. My head was hurting so badly I thought I might have banged it. Stringer was gone. I shook out my clothes, dressed and hauled myself up through the cave entrance. The sunshine set me sweating again. I felt filthy. In the woods, the light that pierced the tree canopy was thick with insects. It was going to be another scorcher.

At *Fallowfield*, the curtains were still drawn. I unlocked the back door with the spare key from the shed and knocked back half a litre of tonic water from Francesca's fridge. Next, I ran myself a bath, ignoring, as I climbed in, the rust-coloured smears on the insides of my thighs. There was pain, too. I couldn't bring myself to investigate. I felt weak and tearful.

Agi arrived at Francesca's at lunchtime to take me home. I was so glad to see her I could barely speak. She was surprised and pleased at the big bear hug I gave her. John came over with my stuff and we loaded the car. He told me Tina was too poorly to say goodbye but that she'd phone, later. She never did. As he hugged me, I remembered Stringer kneeling in the candlelight and pulled away. Nothing felt safe anymore. John kissed my cheek and stooped to run his hand over the spears of lavender flowers at the front of the border. The last I saw of him before we rounded the corner, he was sniffing his fingers.

We moved to Hungary on the twentieth of August 1985. Agi and Feri got married in a civil ceremony a week later. She wore a pale blue suit. Her face was red and shiny and her hair fell out of her bun before they even got to the restaurant. She looked lovely. Afterwards, I got a cab back with one of Feri's nephews who showed me the stitches he got from a recent climbing accident and then puked into my raffia hat. That evening, we moved from our hotel room into Uncle Feri's apartment.

It wasn't until the end of September that I broached the subject of my skipped periods. Agi's response was a complete surprise. No row. No *after-all-I've-done-for-you*. In

headscarf and ankle-boots she caught the tram into town and returned with a Western import pregnancy tester and a packet of chocolate *Nápolyi*. When the blue line appeared in the window, she sat me down kindly and we talked through my options over espresso and wafers. It startled me how badly I'd underestimated her decency. She endorsed my choice of a termination. "Your whole life is before you." It never struck me, until later, how the compromise must have troubled her, a Roman Catholic. "You are young," she kept saying, as if trying to convince herself. She insisted I went to a private clinic across the border in Vienna. The operation was moderately painful and over in an afternoon. It sat easily on my conscience: I considered it a necessary purgative procedure, like lancing a boil or removing a bad tooth. Afterwards, I felt hot and a little light-headed. A page had been torn out and the rest of the book was now blank.

The child would be nearly fifteen now. Unthinkable.

I spent the following three years studying and preparing to audition for the Franz Liszt Academy. In 1988, once I had matriculated, I was accepted. By then, I had traded in my Goth hair for a sensible crop which, to Agi's quiet delight, grew into a bob that swung just above my shoulders. I practised interminably.

One Tuesday afternoon, a years later, I decided to give myself a second chance. A lad called Zoli had struck up a conversation with me in a formal garden next to the Turkish baths – which wasn't as intentional as it sounds – his mother was inside undergoing treatment for lumbar pain while Agi was having something done to her feet. Zoli turned out to be a baritone (nice tone, but limited range) and, on finding out I was also a musician, asked my advice on the programme for a lunchtime recital he was to give. Later that week we met at his apartment while his mother was at work. We spent the afternoon lounging amongst the chaos of discarded clothes in his bedroom – an untidy jumble of tuxedos and football socks. He was diffident and anxious to please. It didn't hurt that time.

There were others after that, but it wasn't until I was inter-railing the summer before my post-grad that I began to understand what all the fuss was about. In an empty dormitory next to the Dordogne, while outside, radios competed, bathers splashed and children squealed, an Economics student from *Clermont Ferrand* lugged me astride him. He'd shrugged, Gallic and complacent, as I'd held my breath on the brink of an amazing discovery. It was a sweltering afternoon. Afterwards, I wondered if my enthusiasm had embarrassed him because when I called at the youth hostel the following evening, I learned that he and his friends had moved on.

But before all that, of course, came the circus of Tina's disappearance. Now, I'd have to revise what I imagined to be the manner of her departure: not a desperate drive into the night, but something far more sinister.

Something involving John Fairfax.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Christmas and New Year passed. Agi kept me supplied with coffee and *Dobos Torta*. Feri would hover at my door from time to time and chatter about the news from Western Europe, the neighbours, the weather. Their delight at seeing me was touched only by their concern. They couldn't have been kinder. I didn't tell them what had happened, only that John and I were finished.

For the first time in my life, I understood why people called it heartbreak: a dead weight in the chest that was at best uncomfortable and at worst thrilled you with nausea. As time went by, the feeling dulled to a flat ache. Losing what I'd had with John almost felt like bereavement. Each day was spent looking forward to night and the unconsciousness of sleep.

At first I struggled to find alternative explanations to soften or at least rationalise what I'd learned. There was no avoiding the facts. John had told me that he hadn't been at home when Tina drove off – that he'd thought she'd gone to stay with friends. It was the same story he'd given the police. Why had he lied if he'd had nothing to hide? Quite apart from being illegal, it also served no purpose but to hamper their efforts to find my sister. The only possible motives had to be sinister. He must have pushed her car over the cliff. To make it look like suicide. Her body had never been discovered. Further contemplation along those lines inevitably reduced me to great, heaving sobs. I'd pondered on the possibility of doing something about what I had learned – ringing the police, telling someone – then realised it would be futile. I had no evidence. All he'd have to do was deny it. I knew how convincing John could be. *The actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place on the stage, and most of all he must believe in what he himself is doing* – he had never tired of quoting those words of Stanislavski's to me. Even if Dawn could be coaxed out of her fucked-up delusions to reiterate what she'd told me, how much weight would her account have, coming to light fifteen years after the event and from someone with a well-documented history of mental illness?

One afternoon, soon after I arrived in Budapest, Agi had walked over to a cupboard and pulled out a box of long-forgotten childhood relics: swimming badges, milk-teeth, a school project on bicycles. "I found all these things when we redecorated. I thought you would like to see them again," she said.

In the box was a large, black book. My diary – oh, God, my diary. I remembered binning it the day Tina's disappearance hit the headlines.

"I rescued it from the rubbish," Agi smiled. "I was sure you would want it in time."

Carefully, I peeled apart the leaves, studiously skipping over the inscription from John on the inside cover. That evening I took it to bed with me. My first few entries were fastidiously neat, but by day three The Scrawl took over. My expulsion from school. Dawn. Stringer. I became weepy as I read: I envied the child I had once been.

It struck me how little and how unkindly I'd written about Tina, how my loyalties had seemed to rest entirely with John. Had I always been in love with him? Vainly, I scrutinised the diary for some indication of the affair he and Francesca had been having. I'd thought them both so perfect. Poor Tina.

As the days turned into weeks, I tried to piece together all the information I had. I wondered why, over the past few months, it had never occurred to me that Francesca was the lover John had talked of. I remembered the pagoda John had made. How could I not have noticed the signs? I couldn't help torturing myself. I imagined John and Francesca in bed together. *I learned a lot from her*, John had said that evening at *Castle Court*. The words took on a new, sordid significance. I wondered if he'd discussed me with her – entertained her at my expense. I thought of the breathless abandonment with which I'd made love to him – and felt humiliated. John and Tina. John and Francesca. John and Elaine. John and God knew who else. *I love you, Patch. I love you, Patch. I love you, Patch.* I tried the phrase out in all the different ways I had heard him say it. What crap. I found myself wondering why on earth he'd asked me to marry him. Had it all been part of some fucked mind-game he'd been playing? I remembered Elaine's smashed tile samples at *Woodside*, Tina's possessiveness and paranoia. Where he was so brilliant was that he was able to make the women he'd fucked over look culpable.

The reasons for Dawn's spitefulness in sending the photograph to Tina, reading between the lines of my diary, were obvious. Dawn's crush on John. The argument we'd had about Kevin Stringer. The way Tina had insulted her at the barbecue. If Dawn had kept her mouth shut, I wondered, would everything have turned out differently? In spite of the fact that Dawn was probably near, if not spot-onto the truth, I couldn't help loathing her. I remembered Dawn telling me, the first day I'd met her again at *Fallowfield*, that she'd followed me and Kevin Stringer to the woods the night Tina disappeared. She must have seen John's car in pursuit of Tina's as she walked back down the track towards the housing estate. I wondered why she'd never told the police. Then I remembered that she wasn't supposed to have been out that night. Was that the reason why? Had she been too scared of

the trouble she'd be in? Or was it something else? I thought of Francesca's words: *poor girl. She's always carried a torch for John*, and that spooky conversation about John with Dawn at *The Haywain*, when she'd told me about Tina's infidelity.

Early in the New Year, Dominic telephoned. He and I had remained in regular contact since I'd been in Hungary. It was good to hear an English voice:

"Em," said Dom, "I just had a another call from John. I'm sure he realises I know where you are. I don't know what to say to him anymore."

My legs felt weak. "You didn't give him Agi's number?"

"Course not. Em, I wish you'd tell me what's going on."

"I can't," I said. "I'm sorry, Dom."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't know. Can't think at the moment."

"You're not staying in Hungary, are you?"

I sighed. "Probably." I didn't have anywhere in England anymore. Dom and Nerissa's purchase of the flat was progressing smoothly.

Dom paused. "Well, as you know, the sofa-bed's crap, but you're always welcome."

"Thanks."

"There's some mail here for you. Shall I forward everything on to you?"

"Please."

"Your piano's safe. Nerissa's even threatening to have lessons."

Another silence. I couldn't think of the right response.

"If there's anything we can do."

"Thank you" I kept parroting myself.

"Em, I'm worried about you."

His caring tone made my eyes well. I already blamed myself entirely for what went wrong between Dominic and me. It only took him meeting a kind, regular non-neurotic girl to turn him into one of the nicest people I knew. Everything I touched turned to shit, died on me or fled. An involuntarily sobby gulp escaped me.

"Em. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine" I bawled.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

This was the sort of February morning I remembered: high sun; sky the colour of utility china; the air ringing with the rasp of a hundred shovels on concrete as people cleared the previous night's snowfall from their doorsteps. It was minus ten, but I was glowing, my feet hot in Agi's sheepskin boots (she had been delighted when she found we still shared the same shoe-size). The air was so cold it tasted sweet.

Since I'd arrived, back in December, I'd walked every day. I found the silence, the crunch underfoot comforting. Once I'd been caught in a flurry and had stood in a wooded clearing with my mouth open, catching and dissolving the unique flakes on my tongue. I had been struck suddenly by my own insignificance and for a wonderful moment I had been able to stand outside myself, some place where I had no past and no future. That night, I'd dreamed I was lying safe on the ocean bed, deep below the storm and didn't wake until nearly lunchtime.

Uncle Feri and I walked past the old peach tree and down towards the lake. He turned to me and smiled. "Do you still swim?"

"Not for years" I said. "Too busy."

"Maybe you can start again," he said, kindly. We walked to the edge where the ice gripped leaves, bubbles of air, a dead starling. Blackened branches reached up through the lake's crust like frost-bitten limbs. "How you loved bathing here in the summer."

From May through September, grass snakes basked on this bit of bank. At the sound of someone approaching, they would glide forward and worry the surface of the lake. Many times I stood silently on this very spot, clutching my towel, watching their zig-zag frog-search through the water. I nodded.

He smiled at me. "You would run back with your teeth chattering, covered in green slime. Your mother used to worry."

I sighed. "She always worries."

"You know you can stay for as long as you like," he said. "We would consider it an honour."

I was touched by his charm. "Thank you."

Feri cleared his throat. "Agi misses you. A trip to England for old crows like us is a big thing." He paused for a moment. "Emi, you know you have a home here if you want it."

"I know," I said. "I'm just not sure how things are going to work out yet."

Three children had crammed themselves onto one toboggan and were hurtling down the bank to our left. They screamed with excitement as they narrowly missed a tree.

“Of course” said Feri, picking up a stone and skimming it across the ice. I remembered Richmond. I remembered John. “There is no hurry. You have all the time in the world.”

When we arrived back at the apartment, there was a stylish German car tidily parked outside. Agi had a visitor: a guy, about my age, sipping espresso from a thimble-sized blue cup. He stood up as we entered the room. “Tibor” said Agi, gushing a little unnaturally. “Meet my daughter, Emma.”

My first impression of Tibi was that he was plain. Not ugly, just ordinary. He had a high, smooth forehead. Low ears that lay at an angle against his head. A wide mouth. Then, as he smiled, I noticed his grey eyes and realised I was wrong. He was one of those blokes you imagine you are the only one to find attractive, and then later discover that other people do too. “Hi” I said, holding out my hand.

“Pleased to meet you.” He didn’t seem completely comfortable taking it, but shook it kindly and smiled.

Agi thrust a plate of bought Strudel under my nose. “I insisted Tibi visit us for some coffee. I knew you would get on.” A smile had frozen rather unnaturally across her face. I frowned.

“Auntie Agi says you have been staying here for a while,” said Tibi. “Welcome to Budapest.” He looked uncomfortable, clutching his absurd little cup and saucer, perched on the edge of one of Agi’s less successful purchases: a huge Bavarian-looking sofa, covered in overblown blue roses. A strange force sucked you back and pinned you against the padding, forcing you to contemplate the world over the mound of your belly.

“Six weeks” I said. Tibi nodded encouragingly and coffee sloshed into the saucer. “I gave up work in England. To look after a sick friend.” I no longer knew how to describe Francesca.

“Auntie Agi told me you had been very good to her.”

I turned to Agi who was busying herself pouring more coffee. “Anyu, you haven’t been boring this poor man with my life story, have you?”

Her eyes widened. “Emikém do not be so modest. You lead such an interesting, exciting life.” What the fuck was she on?

“Agi says you’re an academic,” said Tibi. Oh, God. Agi had been busy.

“Well – not exactly.”

"She tells me you enjoy walking." He patted his chest. "Good for the heart."

"Well, it's not so much for the exercise, really."

He smiled. "I go walking when I need to get -" he thought for a moment "- strength in my mind."

"Me too" I said, surprised.

"Your Hungarian is excellent," he said.

I smiled. "I'm still struggling a bit." I'd realised, on arrival, how rusty my Hungarian had become, but I'd had lots of practice over the past few weeks – Agi's English, always fairly awful, was now practically non-existent. Uncle Feri didn't speak English at all.

"I love England," continued Tibi. A trip to the West had been an impossible dream for pre-Iron-Curtain Hungarians. It was still a pretty big deal. I knew he wanted me to ask him details. He'd been on some themed trip touring Arthurian England. "Beautiful scenery" he said. "But my English is a disgrace."

"I'm sure you're being modest."

He shook his head and looked rueful. "Unfortunately no. All those tenses. Genders. When I say words containing *th* I sound as if I have false teeth. *Vat is ze taim? Sree sirty. Senk-you. Gut-bay!* I am sorry, it is all too difficult for me."

I laughed. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Agi smiling and wandering off towards the kitchen. "What do you do?"

"Optician."

"As a child I had to wear a patch over my eye." I pulled a face. "I thought my optician was a sadist."

Tibi grinned. "I am sure some of my patients must think the same of me." He continued, "I have a shop on Kossuth Lajos Street. Do you know it?" I did. It was a busy high-street in the centre of Budapest. "I know it is not as exciting as being a concert pianist like you." Agi cleared her throat noisily in the kitchen. I looked into my lap. What other bombshells were going to drop?

"Do you enjoy it?" I asked.

"Sure. It is a good living, and I like people," he shrugged. "What sort of music do you play?"

"Whatever I'm paid to," I said.

"But you are an artist. There must be more to it than money." Tibi's grey eyes were twinkling.

“I love French twentieth century music.”

“I love Debussy,” he said.

“Really?”

“And Ravel.”

“Do you play?”

He smiled self-consciously. “An enthusiastic amateur. Not like you, of course. A virtuoso.” I was going to have to talk firmly with Agi after this.

“Great” I said, then suddenly realised I hadn’t played the piano since I’d been at *Fallowfield*. I had a huge pang of missing it. I turned to him. “Do you like playing duets?” I asked.

“What now?”

“Of course, now” I said. “Anyu?”

Agi poked her head around the kitchen door.

“Where is my piano music?”

Agi squatted down in front of the bureau and opened the door. She pulled out a pile of fraying folios.

“Please do not trouble” Tibi panicked. “I would only disgrace myself.” I rifled through.

“- *Gotcha*” I said, retrieving my dog-eared copy of *The Mother Goose Suite*. “Come on. It’s easy.”

“For you, maybe ...”

The piano was in what was supposed to be the apartment’s third bedroom. The room was little more than a large cupboard. Enough space for a piano and a bench that seated two. Agi played a little and when I was younger we had used to duet. I remember her hammering unmusically away at accompaniments, while I raced through semi-quavers like there was no tomorrow. “Emikém” she used to wail. “Not so fast! Sweet heaven, not so fast!” and the hysterical, hilarious cacophony would collide with itself and collapse into our laughter.

I patted the bench next to me.

“Oh my” he groaned. “I know I am going to regret this. I have not played in years.”

“That makes two of us,” I said. “We’ll start slowly. One, two, one, two – how’s that?”

He nodded and we began. It was trickier than I remembered. *Laideronette - Empress of the Pagodas* was in six sharps and the polyrhythms had me counting out aloud. Tibi’s

technique was a little stiff but his sight-reading astonished me (I supposed he was an optician!). With the final chords still ringing, I looked at him.

“Dear Heaven” said Tibi, taking a starched hanky out of his pocket and wiping his forehead. “I knew I should never have agreed.”

“But you were great,” I said.

“Oh, go away” he blushed.

“I mean it.”

“For an optician maybe” he added.

“Especially for an optician.”

“It is a good laugh,” he said after a little pause, looking hard at me. “Maybe we can do some more. I mean properly, with practice.”

“I’d like that” I said. I meant it too.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Two days later, Tibi dropped by our apartment while Agi and Feri were out shopping. No sooner had I shut the front door when he said “I saw this in an antiquarian shop” and handed me a brown paper bag. Inside was a second-hand folio of the Debussy Preludes. “For you.”

“Thank you” I said, surprised at his thoughtfulness. I opened it. Inside, in faded ink, was a dedication from someone whose name I couldn’t decipher, which said *Ich bin der Glückliche Mensch auf diese Erde. Mai 1937*. Written as Hitler stockpiled arms and prepared for world domination. I ran my fingers over the script. “It’s lovely,” I said and he smiled.

“Now, give me space, please” he said, pushing up his shirt sleeves in mock-earnestness. “I think I have made friends with Monsieur Ravel’s polyrhythms.”

He had, as well. When Agi and Feri returned, an hour later, we were still playing.

“We must balance this chord better ...”

“Not so fast here, I cannot bring out the middle voice ...”

“Again. One, two, three ...”

Much later, as Tibi said goodbye on the doorstep, he had shuffled from foot to foot.

“Er – there is a Fellini on at the Thalia. Would you like to come with me?”

What harm could it do? “That would be nice,” I said.

Tibi had pulled all the stops out. The restaurant he’d booked was ludicrously expensive. It was called the *Posthorn*; a beautiful old townhouse that had been turned in the eighteenth century into a restaurant. It had somehow managed to escape wars and revolutions relatively intact and stood defiantly among a hideous collection of Stalinist high-rises. Two liveried waiters held the door for us as we entered and I was vaguely aware of having underdressed for the occasion. One of them was obviously nonplussed by my scruffy trench-coat, which Tibi tipped him handsomely for hanging away (at the end of the evening, when it was returned to me, I suspected it had been discreetly perfumed). “Just a little place I sometimes come to,” he had mumbled modestly as we sat down. In the corner, a real string-quartet played Haydn to a standard worthy of most British Concert Halls. I noticed the musicians

were in their teens and remembered Chantelle, Cassandra, Stacey, Lorinda – all the heartbreaking no-hopers from my teaching days. I suddenly felt older.

The *Posthorn* was one of those places where you constantly feel you should be tipping people but aren't quite sure why or how much. We were ushered to our table, settled and handed menus the size of tea-trays. Oh, God – why didn't I remember to say I was a vegetarian? At length the waiters agreed to concoct something personalised for me, which I suspected would not turn out to be a success. Actually it was sort of okay: a collection of salads and bits and pieces of egg and cheese in mayonnaise, but I was sorry I hadn't warned Tibi. He seemed reassured by my interminable "Hmm, delicious ... Hmm, delicious. Pudding was orgasmic and ended the meal on a high.

Over coffee I asked Tibi how he knew Agi. "Mother lives in János Utca" he said.

"So your mum must be Aunty Bözsi." I made the connection.

He nodded.

Bözsi was Agi's best friend. She visited our apartment regularly. Agi and she spent hours sitting at the kitchen table, exchanging gossip and cackling like fat red hens. Her unannounced arrival always had Feri scrabbling for his walking boots or crossword if it was snowing too hard. He never spoke ill of anyone, but I once heard him mutter, "I have never seen that woman with her mouth closed – even when she eats."

I studied Tibi's straight, light-brown hair, which flopped in a cow's lick over his forehead. "I think there is even a slight resemblance."

He coloured and tilted his head. "She will love you for saying so. Everyone always says I resemble Father's side of the family."

"Your Dad?" I hadn't heard Bözsi mention a husband.

"He lives near *Hösök Tere*. My parents are no longer together."

"*Snap*," I said.

"Pardon?"

"An English expression. How old were you?" I asked.

"Sixteen." Tibi re-folded his napkin and rested his elbows on the table. "It was difficult for a while, but we talked it through. There are no hard feelings. Now they telephone each other regularly for chats, and we even all go to dinner together from time to time."

“Agi and my Dad were a disaster,” I said. “Every conversation used to end in a fight. God knows why they got together in the first place.” I paused as I remembered. “Agi tried hard not to criticise him in front of me, but I could read her feelings clearly.”

“It cannot have been easy for your mother in England,” Tibi said.

I remembered Agi’s blue pills. The vermouth bottles she used to hide and put straight into the dustbin on collection day. The way she would crash on the sofa each evening. I’d used to test how gone she was by turning the volume on the television as high as it would go. It never woke her, but she would stop snoring briefly. I suddenly felt sorry for her in a way I never had at the time. I asked if Tibi had brothers and sisters.

“Just me,” he said. “I was spoiled, I expect.”

“Tina was only my half-sister,” I said, “and she was at boarding school by the time I was born, so I was almost an only child.”

“Were you lonely?”

I thought about it. “Yes. I mean, I could hardly wait for Tina to come back in the holidays. When I was with her, I was able to do all the things Agi wouldn’t let me, like eat chocolate before meals and not wash my hands. Sometimes, she’d take me into town.” I grinned. “She used to shop-lift. Not big things – just make-up, stuff like that.”

“She sounds like every mother’s worst nightmare,” said Tibi, looking scandalised.

I thought for a moment. “I suppose she was,” I said. “Agi always used to accuse her of inciting me. At the time, I’d thought her unreasonable, but looking back on it, she was probably right.” The waiter arrived and refilled our coffee cups. “How about you?”

Tibi smiled. “I always had lots of friends.”

“I didn’t like the other children. They seemed boring next to Tina. They thought me privileged. There was a lot of name-calling. One girl was particularly nasty. She said my sister was mad and ought to be locked away.

“Children are much crueller than adults,” said Tibi.

“I set fire to her gym-bag.”

Tibi stared as if I’d said something completely outrageous. Then he chortled, delighted. It felt good, making someone laugh, so I told him, with a twinkle in my eye, that I’d been expelled and the reason why. For a moment he looked genuinely horrified, and I was worried I’d shocked him – even the string quartet had a slight hiccup which left the viola player staring angrily at his sheet music – but soon he began chuckling again. For the first time in weeks, I felt fun, worth being with. I thought how insecure and neurotic John had

made me and then, before I could stop myself, wondered what he was doing now. I must have gone a little quiet.

“Emi? Are you alright?”

I forced myself to smile. “Of course.”

“For a moment you looked sad.”

“It’s nothing. Truly.” With a huge effort, I pushed aside all thoughts of John and threw myself into another childhood anecdote. Tibi started laughing.

We never made the Fellini Retrospective, spending the evening chatting over dessert, and coffee. At length Tibi was discreetly handed the bill on a silver tray. There were no more customers left and the staff had already started putting the chairs upside down onto the tables.

Hungarian houses are always overheated in winter. When I awoke, the following morning, I was sprawled across the bed, with the quilt lying in a heap on the floor where I’d kicked it off during the night. In anticipation of the forecast cold snap, Agi and Feri had turned the heating to China Syndrome setting. Breathless and clammy, I could hardly bear to pull on my dressing gown. I clumped grumpily through the sitting room to the kitchen where the breakfast table was laden with bread rolls, cured ham, salami, cheese, pickles. They sweated slightly in the heat. I still felt stuffed from last night. I sat down and reached for the coffee pot. Agi was at the sink, humming a waltz from some little-performed operetta.

“It’s stifling in here,” I said. “Can I open a window?”

Agi huffed. “Emikém. Take a look outside.” She motioned to the whirling snow through the glass.

“Can I at least turn the radiator off?”

Agi pursed her lips. “I could never understand this English habit of putting heating in a house and then not using it.”

It was pointless to argue. “It’s like a sauna in here” I muttered, anyway.

Agi turned back to the washing up. “How was your evening with Tibi?” she asked.

“Lovely. He’s nice.” I shuffled through the pile of post in case there was anything for me. There wasn’t. I frowned. Dominic had said he’d forwarded my mail on weeks ago. Oh well.

“Yes, he is a *very* nice boy,” said Agi, peering sideways at me from under her fringe.

“Agi” I warned.

“You know, he worked so hard for that shop. Built it up from nothing. By himself. His father did not give him so much as a forint towards it.”

I stared at her. She realised I had read her accurately. “We’re just friends. That is all.”

Agi raised her eyebrows in feigned innocence. “Of course you are, *Virágom*. Of course you are.”

Chapter Forty

Over the next few weeks, Tibi and I met regularly. The black German car would arrive, bearing Tibi and some sort of gift. Chocolates, flowers, perfumes of every conceivable scent, nationality and colour. I started feeling uncomfortable. Falteringly, I began to explain that I'd just broken off an engagement and wasn't ready for another relationship yet, when Tibi cut in: "your sister's ex?"

I sighed. "I wish Agi would stop gossiping."

He smiled a little sheepishly. "I did not mean to upset you."

"You didn't."

"What on earth made you get involved in the first place?"

"Tibi, please..."

"I'm sorry." He put his arm around my shoulders. "Of course I understand; you need time."

The gifts kept flooding in. Instead of chocolates I began to get pretty silver jewellery, instead of flowers, tickets to sell-out shows and in the end a beautiful Swiss watch. It had become impossible to say anything without appearing ungrateful. I kept telling myself I was being over-sensitive. After all, I liked him. I felt flattered. I couldn't see what possible harm could come of all this. I couldn't even really work out why I didn't want it, I just knew in my heart of hearts that I didn't.

"Oh, God, the last time I did this I ended up in casualty with a fractured ankle. I must be mad." I finished tying my laces and stood up.

Tibi grinned. "Just hold on to me. You'll be okay."

Hundreds of people, all wrapped up in hats and scarves, were scraping and tottering anti-clockwise around the ice that covered *Városliget* Lake. The antiquated PA system was grinding away at an excerpt from *Swan Lake* to a disco-beat. It was late evening, and the place was floodlit. Agi had lent me her boots. I tested the ice with the serrated edge of the blade. Tibi took my hand. "Ready?" he smiled at me.

"No, not yet," I gasped, eyeing the ice, terrified. My left leg shot out in front of me.

"Steady." He put his arm around my waist. I regained my balance. "Come on."

“No!” I screamed as we joined the moving train of skaters. His arm stayed where it was.

“See?” he said, after a few moments. “I told you it would be fine.”

A couple of lads on hockey-skates were expertly hurtling across the ice, sometimes deftly changing direction or going backwards. There were great surfs of shaved snow as they dug their blades in to stop. They kept their hands nonchalantly in their pockets and occasionally spat on the ice. People kept out of their way. Tibi seemed, or pretended, not to notice. Eventually, one knocked the arm of a little girl and she fell heavily. There were tears and the little girl’s father made great play of rubbing bumped knees and elbows but never pursued the careless skater, who by now was slouched on the barrier, smoking.

“I can never understand why people have to be so rude” said Tibi. “Why can people not enjoy life without spoiling it for others?”

I looked more curiously at his smooth skin, his serene brow. I couldn’t imagine him ever being angry. “Are you happy?” I said.

He looked puzzled, even shaken by my question. “Of course I am happy,” he said. Then he looked concerned, “aren’t you? Shall we go home?”

“Don’t you ever get restless?”

“Only in bad traffic. You have seen me curse the other drivers. I am sorry” he smiled at me and we nearly collided with an elderly woman dragging a screaming toddler in a sledge.

I thought for a moment. “Don’t you ever think you might be missing out on something?” I asked. “Or wonder if there’s something better out there?”

“When we are together, I am perfectly happy,” he said. I must have looked sad because he gave me a squeeze. “What is it? Is it your ex?”

I clenched my jaw, a little irritated.

“I’m sorry. Have I offended you?” He looked concerned.

I sighed. It wasn’t his fault. “Of course you haven’t offended me.” I felt a sudden wave of warmth towards him. “You have been so kind.”

“That is because I care about you.”

In the middle of the ice, a girl in jeans and bomber jacket pirouetted. I watched, fascinated as she reached her arms above her head, spinning faster and faster, until she was just a blur. She finished off the movement with an abrupt scrape of the ice, stretched one leg out behind her and then disappeared back into the crowd.

"I don't know anyone like you," he said.

I tried to adjust my steps to fit in with his. I tried relaxing.

Later, when we got cold, we changed our boots and walked to a nearby cellar-café.

Inside, in one corner of the cramped bar was a *cimbalom*. Next to it, a double bass lay on its side. A group of Germans in the corner stamped their feet loudly as three musicians in elaborately-frogged waistcoats walked towards the raised platform.

"Oh, God, tourist kitsch," said Tibi, smiling and rolling his eyes.

One of the gypsies stooped and pulled a violin from its case by the neck. My heart leapt. For a moment I gazed, entranced, at his thick shoulders and unruly black hair. Then he turned to face the audience and any resemblance to John was lost. I still felt dizzy as the gypsy tucked the violin under his chin and ran his bow lightly over the strings. The *cimbalom* player started to sing a traditional *Magyarnóta*.

It is time to be on my way

The world stretches ahead of me

Nothing holds me back

Everything I've ever known lies behind me

"Drink up, Emma" shouted Tibi, over the music. "Let's go back to my place."

The hedgerows are full of blossom

But deep shadows cross my path

Robbing me of my happiness

Shrouding my steps in sadness

I downed the last of my wine, put my glass on the bar then walked up the stairs.

Outside on the pavement, I could still hear the song coming up through the grating. It faded as we walked down the street.

The sky above me is cloudy

But it does not rain

My eyes are shaded in sadness

My tears fall fast like raindrops

A tram whispered through the brown slush.

Tibi's apartment was on *Josef Korut*. It was part of a large, semi-decomposing Art Nouveau building overlooking the ring road. If you walked down the side street next to it you could still make out the lines of bullet holes left by revolutionary gunfire more than forty years ago. Typically for the period, the building had a central courtyard. Cast iron steps gave a hollow ring as you walked up them. Nothing seemed entirely safe and I always imagined the decaying catwalks and parapets giving way beneath me.

"Can I get you something?" asked Tibi, once we were inside. He switched the light on, a little self-consciously. "Wine? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be fantastic" I enthused, trying to put him at his ease. "Beautiful apartment" I continued. It was immaculately tidy. A settee and a couple of Hapsburg-style armchairs. A Persian rug. There were three superb oil-paintings on the largest wall. "My grandfather commissioned them" announced Tibi from the kitchenette. They must have been what everybody commented on as soon as they saw his apartment, because he couldn't have seen me looking at them. A handsome man in a turn-of-the-century frock-coat stood next to a frail-looking woman. In her fist she clutched a birdcage. There was a still-life; dewy fruit and an overturned wine-pitcher. The third was the best. Three ancient peasants sat cross-legged on the ground, playing dice. They were laughing, yellow teeth showing. One of them had a little girl fast asleep in his lap. I loved the dirtiness of the location and the freshness of their happiness. As I looked around Tibi's immaculate sitting room, it dawned on me that, of the three, this painting must have meant the least to him. For a moment I felt lonelier than I could ever remember.

In the corner of the room was a baby grand. On the stand stood my battered copy of *Mother Goose*. There were fingerings in pencil on the open pages. The piano was a *Blüthner*. I depressed a couple of the keys.

"It's a bit too late to start playing now," said Tibi, behind me. I hadn't heard him enter the room. "But I can put some music on, quietly, if you like."

"Great" I nodded.

He chose some American soft rock. The red display of the graphic equaliser flickered as a gravelly voice started to sing something about being eighteen and sitting in the back of a Chevy. Tibi switched on a couple of lamps, turned the main light off and sat on the sofa next to me. Carefully, he placed his arm around my shoulders. Then he whispered, anxiously, "is it alright if I do this?" He picked up his coffee cup and it rattled against the saucer.

My silence made him clumsy. I tried to think of some way of easing the situation, but realised I had no idea what I was even trying to achieve any more. I realised it was about time I gave myself another chance and got on with my life. Tibi was a really nice bloke: well-mannered; kind; loads in common; no skeletons. It was perfect. I just needed to get used to the idea.

“Of course.” My voice sounded distant, as if somebody else was speaking. “It’s fine,” I said, making myself relax.

“Sure?”

I nodded. He leaned forward and kissed me, awkwardly, on the lips. He smelled of talcum powder. I closed my mind to the thought that I was being somehow disloyal to something and kissed him back. He pulled me closer. After a while, my neck started to ache, but I said nothing and cuddled up to him. He was smiling. “I think I’ve fallen for you, Emma,” he said. Tibi’s round face stared down at me, a faint flush along his cheekbones. I changed the awkward angle of my elbow and he kicked off his shoes.

In the bedroom, Tibi kept one lamp on. He was gentle, patient and considerate. I closed my eyes and tried not to think of John. Afterwards, I hated myself. I cried.

“It was wonderful, wasn’t it?” whispered Tibi, holding me in his arms. “I feel the same way as you.”

I couldn’t sleep. Once Tibi was breathing gently, I disentangled myself. My clothes were lying on the floor muddled up with his and I didn’t want to wake him, so I stepped, naked, into the hall, slipped on my trench-coat and a pair of Tibi’s trainers, and walked onto the balcony. The freezing air hit me as cleanly as a bucket of water. I lit a cigarette, leaned over the railings and stared down into the blackness of the courtyard.

Chapter Forty-One

“Hi” I called, booting the front door shut.

Agi folded her arms and eyed the sports bag I was carrying suspiciously. “Have you been eating properly?”

“Agi” I said, dropping and kicking the bag through to the kitchen, “I seem to spend my whole life in restaurants these days.”

“One day Tibi might buy himself a washing-machine” Agi groused to Feri, trying as hard as she could not to look delighted.

“Then we’d *never* see our Emi,” said Feri giving me a great big kiss “and that would never do.”

Since the night, a month ago, I’d first stayed with Tibi, my life had been unequally balanced between here and Tibi’s apartment. Life had acquired a pattern. I’d sunk into a strange type of lethargy. Any resolve I might have had to find a job evaporated. “But why?” Tibi cajoled, when I pointed out a small ad in a paper. “I make more in an hour than that job pays in a week.” I’d looked blankly at the newsprint as Tibi kissed my cheek. “I like having you here. Practice the piano, if you want something to keep you busy. You can entertain me in the evenings.” I tried to picture myself living in a kind of Hungarian *Mansfield Park* – and failed.

It was early March. In England there would be sharp winds, snowdrops, maybe daffodils. Lambs nuzzling into the flanks of ewes in the fields. Here, there was still brown slush in the gutters and the sky was the colour of over-stewed meat. I felt pale and sluggish. I’d put on weight. I longed to talk to someone in English. I’d have given anything for some fresh fruit that wasn’t an orange.

“How is Tibi?” asked Agi.

“Sends his love” I said, automatically.

“There are letters for you.” Agi gestured towards a thick wadge on the kitchen table, held together with an elastic band.

I picked them up. All of them had English post-marks, dating back to December and January. All were addressed to my old flat in London and had been forwarded by Dominic. I wondered why they’d taken so long to get here. I studied the address that he’d scribbled on the envelopes. Wrong area code. God, Dom. I flicked through them: three ancient bank statements. Numerous Christmas cards. A letter from the library about a long-overdue book

– I dreaded to think what the find would be by now. A load of junk mail. Underneath all the windowed envelopes were three personal letters. I recognised the writing immediately. My heart pounded. I tucked them in my pocket, went to my bedroom and sat on my bed, chewing my index finger. I tore the skin. A shiny drop wobbled next to my cuticle. I reached for a tissue and watched the red stain spread quickly through the white layers.

Agi popped her head around the door, “*Kincsem*, would you like coffee?” She looked baffled as I dashed past her.

“Going for a walk,” I said, grabbing my jacket from the hook and snapping the loop by which it hung.

I nearly knocked the cleaning-lady over on the stairs. She grumbled something about young people, but I barely heard.

Breathless, I sat on a bench by the Danube and studied the black writing on the envelopes. For a while, I tried to psych myself up sufficiently to throw them in the water. *One, two three ... no. One, two three ... go on ...* I thought of the paper going soggy, and the script dissolving into illegible smears. *No.*

I tucked my finger under the flap of the earliest post-marked letter, touched the start of the gum, where he must have licked, and tore slowly. John’s rounded handwriting squiggled across the page. I scanned it, not daring to read too closely.

...Where the HELL are you? ... sending this letter to your flat ... hope Dominic's forwarding your...

I opened the next letter.

... God's sake, Patch, CALL me.

... don't say where you are if you don't want, but let me know you're ...

And the next.

... at least the chance to put the record straight, and then decide ...

... how on earth could you believe that I'd ...?

... not what you think, Patch. Don't you know me at all ...?

And then another.

... going crazy here without ...

... love you very much, Patch ...

I could hear his voice in my head. A pale blue splash appeared on the page. Then another. I realised there were tears coursing down my face and was vaguely aware of people staring at me through the window of a boat-café, as it sailed past.

I just sat there, reading and re-reading the letters until I had entire phrases by heart. The sudden recollection of his smile was almost unbearable. I felt sick with longing for him. For a wild moment, I wished it were possible to unknow what I knew and then hated myself for my weakness. I reminded myself of the anger in his eyes and how scared I'd been that last afternoon at *Woodside*. Why had I ever trusted him? I should have guessed. Or should I? Was it possible that there was another explanation about his subterfuge over Tina – one I hadn't thought of? He hadn't denied anything, but he hadn't admitted killing her, either. What could have been his motive? I'd been wrong about so much, so many times. I tried to dwell on the humiliation of discovering his affair with Francesca. It hardly seemed to matter anymore. I struggled to extinguish the small spark of hope I felt but found myself clinging to the letters until they crumpled in my hands. Then my resolve hardened. I wasn't going to let myself be duped again.

By the time I got back, Tibi and Bözsi had arrived for lunch. Dazed and distant, I almost forgot to kiss him.

Bözsi took charge as we started to take our places at the table. "First, we must have photographs." She herded us all into a corner and cramped us together so we fitted in the viewfinder and then said "where's Feri?"

Agi tutted. "Everything's getting cold."

"We need Feri."

"I've already called him twice." Agi walked to the bedroom, and opened the door. Feri was sitting in an armchair, peering intently into a newspaper. "Feri. Come immediately. We need you for the family album." Reluctantly, he put down his paper and stepped into the space we'd made for him.

A few flashes. "Now, the two sweethearts" said Bözsi. "Come along, cuddle up. Emi? Tibi?"

I shuffled towards him. Another flash. "And a big *puszi* for the camera?" Tibi smiled at me and puckered dutifully against my cheek.

"Ah, charming" she said – flash – and put her camera back in its case. "Now, Agi. How can I make myself useful?" As she walked towards the kitchen I heard my mother whisper to her "I've never seen Emi so content. She looks quite flushed with happiness."

"Come and sit next to me" mouthed Tibi.

Luckily the food started to arrive so I didn't have a chance to join him on the sofa. Agi had overcatered as usual.

Tibi chomped appreciatively. "This is the best layered cabbage I have tasted in years."

Agi beamed. "Oh, nonsense."

Bözsi nodded in agreement. "Pork. Excellent. It is incredible what you can do with cheap meat if you have a flair for cooking." She turned to me. "You must try it."

"You know Emma is a vegetarian," said Tibi.

"Nonsense" said Bözsi. "Everyone eats meat."

"I don't."

She laughed. "So what do you make for Tibor, here, after he has had a hard day at work? Salad? No, little one. *Hunter's Stew* or *Gypsy Steaks* for a man."

"Mother."

Everyone had gone quiet.

She smiled at me and dumped a spoonful of minced crap on my plate. "The trouble with you, my girl, is that you do not know what is good for you."

There were splashes of pig fat on my potatoes. I stood up, scraped the chair against the wooden floor and ran into my bedroom.

"Sit down, Tibi." I heard Bözsi mutter through the closed door. "You are too soft with her. She must learn."

Later Agi brought me a tray.

"Come back with me."

"Tibi, I can't."

He got up and paced up and down my bedroom. "Why do you have to be like this? She said she was sorry."

"It's not because of that."

"Then why are you so stubborn?"

I sighed.

He sat down again next to me. "Please."

I put my face in my hands.

He peeled them away. "I love you."

"I know you do."

"So what is it, then? Emi? Tell me."

"Nothing." I sighed, then stood up. "Tired." I pulled my bag from under my bed and packed a change of clothes. I hated myself.

I didn't want to go to the theatre. Or a film. Or a concert.

"Emi, what's wrong?"

"Nothing" I snapped. Then more quietly "Nothing. Let's just go home."

"Why not?" He rolled onto his back. I pulled the quilt up to my chin.

"I'm tired," I said.

"You're always tired. Please tell me what the matter is."

"Nothing. I promise."

"Is it him?"

I said nothing.

"Emi, it was nearly four months ago. Don't you think it's about time you forgot him?"

"Tibi, please."

"I'm worried, Emi." He sounded fraught and confused. "I'm afraid I am losing you."

I'd made him like this. I swallowed and propped myself up on one elbow. "Sorry," I whispered, stroking his forehead. I couldn't have borne it if he'd cried, so I silenced him with a kiss. He put his arms around my neck. I felt his tongue on my teeth. Warily, I let him push me back against the pillow. None of this was his fault.

Once Tibi was asleep, I lay awake listening to the rumble of the night-traffic on the ring-road. Tibi's alarm clock said two-forty-three when I eventually gave up all hope of sleep and got

up to make myself a cup of something. Hungarian tea is revolting, so I set about mixing cocoa powder with water. I was glad of the hassle – it kept me occupied.

Tibi's telephone was in the hallway, crouching on a table under where the coats were hanging. The immediate possibility of hearing John's voice suddenly struck me. The thought made me weak. I lowered myself onto the cold wooden floor, pulled my T-Shirt over my knees and picked up the receiver. There was no answer from the *Woodside* number. I dialled his mobile.

The telephone rang for ages. I was just about to hang up when a groggy voice grunted "Yes?"

I whispered his name. There was a long pause. "Where are you?"

Across the hall, in the bedroom, Tibi murmured something in his sleep.

John swore. "I need to see you. Please. I can't bear this."

I started choking into the receiver. I bit on my fist to muffle the sound.

"Patch. Tell me where you are and I'll come and get you."

Tibi sighed. The bedclothes made a swishing sound. "Emi, is everything alright?"

I put the receiver down. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Chapter Forty-Two

The following morning I busied myself with the breakfast things while Tibi got ready for work. After he'd left, I washed the dirty crockery, dried it, replaced it in the neat stacks that he preferred, and paced around the intolerably small apartment, unable to settle. The three peasants laughed silently over their dice-game. The ashen woman clutched her birdcage and stared miserably into nothingness. The thought of carrying on like this terrified me, and yet the alternative seemed impossibly cruel and impractical. I kept hearing John's voice: *tell me where you are and I'll come and get you*. I was worried about upsetting Agi, but most of all I couldn't bear to hurt Tibi. I knew I already had. I started to think up reasons why it wasn't all my fault, and then was appalled by how selfish my weakness had made me. Neurotic. Disingenuous. Impossible to please. I said the words over and over again, like some fucked mantra. What on earth was I turning into?

I caught a tram back to Agi's and Feri's apartment. As I travelled, I thought of red buses. The sharp smell of Soho pavements after the rain. The crap-choked pond on Tooting Bec Common. Mr Patel watching cricket on a portable TV squeezed between the wines and spirits. *Punjabi Puri* £1.25. *Gay-girl Tinned Mango*. The bell on the door of his shop. "Lovely day," he would smile, reaching up for my usual brand of cigarette. I'd nod in agreement and wave at his two brown-eyed daughters through the stockroom door. *Sangetty Lightvessel Automatic – fair to medium clearing to good*.

What was I supposed to tell Tibi? *Sorry, I don't love you*. Worse. *I never have*. I felt ill with regret. Sick with guilt. I played a game with myself. One more red signal and I'd tell Tibi we were finished. Two number six trams in a row and I'd go back to England. If the sun came out in the next ten minutes then ... If the sun came out in the next ten minutes then ... I felt my eyes burn.

Agi was out shopping, but Feri was there, perched precariously on a ladder in the kitchen, inspecting his jars of pickles.

"Hello" I called up.

He jumped and then squinted in the bright light streaming through the windows.

If the sun came out in the next ten minutes then ...

"I need a moment," I said.

He nodded and climbed down.

"I must book a flight."

Feri fiddled with the ball of string he was holding and was silent. "Do you know what you are doing, Emi?" he asked, eventually.

"Of course" I lied.

"Tibi?" he said.

"I can't go on." I sounded like someone in a Tuesday matinee and suddenly understood how clichés were born.

Feri didn't look surprised. He just waited for me to compose myself before saying. "Then you must tell him."

I took a deep breath. "I will. Agi -"

"Do not worry about your mother," said Feri. "I'll talk to her. Do you want me to call the airport?"

I nodded.

If the sun ... If the sun ... Oh, fuck.

A letter would be kindest, I deluded myself.

As I clanged up the iron staircase to Tibi's apartment, I pulled it out of my bag. It took seeing the front door; the cutsey-lion knocker, the little tubs of hyacinths which he watered every morning, to pull me up short. To think I had called *Dawn* a cunt. I put the letter back in my pocket, knocked at the door and hoped against hope that Tibi wasn't at home.

"Emi?" he smiled. "I was not expecting you. Come in." I walked into his hallway. "Let me take your coat."

I froze. "No." I hugged it tightly around me and saw realisation flood his features. "I'm so sorry," I whispered.

Eventually, he said "why, Emi?"

I stared out of the window. High above, an aeroplane drew a line across the sky.

"I will try to understand." I heard the pain in his voice and would have given anything to be able to take it all back, pretend it had all been a huge mistake. "But it will not be easy."

"I know," I said, softly.

"I heard you call someone, last night."

My raw cuticles throbbed. I stared at my feet. "I never -"

"Please. Until now we have always told each other the truth."

"I didn't know this would hurt so much," I said.

"Good-bye, Emi. And thank you – I mean it."

I walked towards him. "Tibi? I'm –"

"Good-bye."

Some way down the street I dropped the letter into a litter-bin, amongst half-eaten burgers and old newspapers.

I hung around the airport all next morning, waiting for standbys. Eventually I made it onto a spooky Swiss shuttle and had to wait two and a half hours in Zurich for a connection. I arrived at Heathrow at a little before midnight. No one even bothered checking the dodgy-looking, seven-year-old photograph of me in my passport. Dominic and Nerissa were waiting behind the barrier. Nerissa looked film-star glamorous, her brown cheeks gleaming under her white fake-fur hat. I felt dazed and tired and stupid. For an insane moment I thought of pretending I hadn't seen the piece of cardboard she held with *Welcome Back* written on it, smiling faces dotted amongst the letters, and catching a cab instead. Dominic had put on a little weight. It suited him. I hugged them both. Tears. I seemed to have cried my way across Europe. "Blimey, Em" said Dom, inspecting me. "You look awful."

"For God's sake, Dominic" hissed Nerissa.

Dominic looked chastened. "Is this all your luggage?" He picked up my suitcase and started walking towards the car park, dragging the little steel wheels over the sandalled foot of a woman in a sarong. "Oops, sorry." She smiled and limped away. "What are you going to do now?"

My nose was running. I didn't have a tissue. I blew into a brown paper bag I had in my pocket. "Don't know," I said.

At the top of the ramp, Nerissa fumbled in her pocket and inserted the car park ticket into the *Pay Here* machine. When the amount appeared in the display she said "how much? They're having a laugh" and inserted a ten pound note which the machine swallowed greedily before spitting out some pathetic loose change.

We spent ten minutes hunting for the car. The multi-storey seemed to have been built to a design by Escher. We went down staircases, traversed walkways, traipsed up the concrete spiral exit route, only to end up in what looked like exactly the same place we'd started from. The battered estate was languishing next to the lift.

"It's knackered" said Dominic, reversing out of the space with alarming ferocity. "We'll be okay on the motorway, but if I slow down I have to pull the choke right out, otherwise it stalls." The car whined like a bullock.

"Something to do with the timing" said Nerissa knowledgeably.

I started laughing, with a kind of hysterical relief. "What?" said Dominic.

"Nothing. Just glad to be back," I said.

There was no traffic. I felt as if I'd been away for years, and yet nothing had changed. There were even the same roadworks on the M25. When we arrived at the flat, the sofa bed was already made up. "Try not to make any sudden movements," warned Nerissa. "One of the legs is missing. I had to improvise with a mic-stand." She smiled at me. "Cup of tea? Coffee?"

"No. Just a shower and a sleep. I'll be fine. Thanks."

"You poor thing." Nerissa indicated the tiny bathroom. "You know the way. Welcome home."

PART 9

Chapter Forty-Three

"Wicked! Plastik Daddy, featuring Sugar B Good, with Powder Burn. Time is coming up to eight-thirty-one. Now the news with -"

I rubbed my eyes.

"Emma?" Nerissa was tapping gently on the door. "I've brought you your tea. Can I come in?"

"Sure." I sat up sleepily.

She opened the door and walked in. Nerissa was dressed in a yellow tartan suit. Her shocking pink lipstick made me blink. She carefully lowered herself onto the edge of the sofa bed. "Did you sleep okay?"

I nodded and ran my fingers over the creases in my cheek that the sheet had made. She handed me a steaming mug. "Dom and I have to leave in a mo. Meeting with the bank manager."

"Oh God."

"It's okay" she beamed. "We're opening a business account. What are you going to do today?"

My stomach did a bit of a somersault. "Just a couple of phone calls."

There came the familiar sound of the wardrobe door opening and closing. "Riss," shouted Dominic from the bedroom. I heard the slide and click of the ironing board. "Have you seen my blue shirt?"

"No, Dominic, have you?" she shouted back.

"For God's sake" muttered Dominic. There was a crash.

"Everything alright?" No answer.

I looked around the sitting room where I'd slept. Nerissa had redecorated. Dom may have been enlisted to wield a paintbrush, but nothing more, I was sure. The walls were lime green. There were cerise blinds and leopard-print throws. It had to look hideous, and yet ... A vase of huge paper sunflowers bloomed on the sideboard. "I love how you've done the room," I said. "The colour's fab."

"Thanks," she smiled. "Bathroom's next."

They'd moved things around, too. The pair of armchairs, re-covered, were now in the bay under the window. A hideous occasional table Agi once donated had been transformed with gold paint and costume jewellery into something I positively coveted. I suddenly realised what impressed me so much about Nerissa. She could take something unassuming – anything – a table, a cheese sandwich, Dominic – and transform it magically.

“Does it seem weird, seeing your old flat like this?”

“A little, perhaps, but not unpleasant.”

“It's funny. This should all feel a bit awkward, but it doesn't.”

“I know. Secret love-triangle. Shock-horror probe.”

We both giggled.

“Riss? You ready?” Dominic stood in the doorway, buttoning his shirt. “Oh, hi Em. Could you put the rubbish out?”

“Dom, what are you like?” tutted Nerissa. “Come on, we're late. Emma, you know where everything is.” She smiled as she manoeuvred Dominic out of the flat.

I waited until three cigarettes past nine before I dialled the number at *Woodside*. My heart plummeted when a woman answered.

“Is John Fairfax there?” I almost whispered.

The woman was silent for a moment before saying “I'm afraid he no longer lives here.”

Suddenly, I recognised her voice. “Is that Elaine?” I squeaked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Who is this?”

“It's Emma Petty. Patch.”

The line went dead.

I chain-smoked four more cigarettes before trying John's mobile.

He answered with a tetchy “Hm? What?” I could hear traffic in the background.

“John?”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Patch?” I heard the phone clatter to the floor and John scrabbling to pick it up. “Patch, are you still there?”

I waited a moment. “Yes.”

He groaned. “Thank God. Where the fuck are you?”

“London.”

He swore copiously.

Through the window came the drone and clatter of the dustcart. Shit. The rubbish. Sorry Dom. I tilted my head back, stared at the ceiling and concentrated on the sound of John’s breath. “Staying with Dominic and Nerissa.”

“I’ve been worried sick.” I hadn’t heard him sound like this for years. *Patch, if you’re not back by ten-thirty ... Patch, be sensible ... Patch, don’t be in such a hurry to grow up ...* “Why did you hang up on me?”

I thought of Tibi and my stomach lurched. What a mess. “I can’t discuss it like this.”

“Are you alright?”

“Not really. I only just received your letters. I’ve been in Hungary. Can we talk?”

He was silent for a moment. I suddenly heard the sound of a car-horn and John swear under his breath. “Patch, I’m driving round Hyde Park Corner. Can I call you back? I’ll sort something out.”

“Right.”

“You’ll be there all day, won’t you?” Another car-horn (“for fuck’s sake. Wanker!”)

“Probably.”

“Listen, I’ve got to go. I’m late for rehearsal. Don’t go out. Just don’t go out.”

“I won’t.”

He rang off.

I watched morning television. And waited. And waited. *New You: Beauty on a budget; Is your child being bullied?; The Male Menopause – fact or fiction?; My father ran off with my best friend.*

And waited.

Dom arrived back alone with fistfuls of glossy bank hand-outs and two doughnuts.

“Where’s Nerissa?”

“Gone to find gold spray-paint.”

Dominic sat at the kitchen table and produced a shoebox.

“New shoes?”

“Accounts” he replied grimly, and emptied the box of receipts out onto the table.

He began stapling receipts to cheque stubs.

“Mind if I watch telly?”

“No probs,” said Dominic absently. “Help yourself to a doughnut.”

The news. A racial attack. A missing child (inset school photograph of freckly smile and wonky teeth). The extinction of a tiny marsupial with a long Latin name. Lunchtime soaps – *g'day* – *Aaron Maas as Tugg*, *Trinity Westlake as Dizzy*. An interminable Hollywood adaptation of *The Odyssey* with shit acting and a brilliant underscore. The phone sat stubbornly silent.

I went back into the kitchen to make myself another coffee I didn't really want. Dominic was talking into the telephone while scrutinising the figures in a large, open ledger. "Well have another look, please. We sent you the payment on the fifth of March." I bit my nails and hoped he'd get off the line soon.

It was quarter to three. The window was slightly open. I sat down and stared out. A guy with tattoos and a crew-cut was chasing a little girl around the conker trees. She dragged a dolls' pram, shrieking with delight, "you can't catch me!" Daffodils gently butted the dark green railings.

"I'm sorry, it's *your* records that are wrong" Dominic insisted. A short pause. "Well, it didn't stop you cashing it on the twelfth" he said a little crossly. I'd never heard him like this. I was surprised and impressed.

An old lady stooped with a pooper-scooper. "Good girl" she enthused to a squatting poodle. "Good girl."

Dominic hung up and raised his eyes heavenwards. "Prats."

"Anything wrong?"

"*Toastamatix*. New computer system. Whole place is in chaos."

I peered over Dominic's shoulder. He was tapping away at his calculator. After a moment he triumphantly filled in a black rectangle. £1,253.92. "Figures give Nerissa a headache. I do the books now." I noted the neat columns. The careful sums. "Actually, it gives me a bit of a buzz. Getting everything to add up." He snapped the book shut. "Result! We're in profit."

I heard the pride in his voice and remembered all the arguments we'd had over money. "Congratulations" I said, and meant it.

"Higher, higher" the little girl on the swing squealed.

"You've – mm – changed," I said, eventually.

"Have I?" Dominic paper-clipped an invoice, which said "paid" on it, to a letter.

"You're really together now."

"So I'm not all bad then ... " He smiled.

"I never thought you were."

"A lot of it's down to you, Em."

"Come off it, Dom."

"You always said I was a flake –" I tried to interrupt but Dominic went on "- and you were right."

"But you're not, Dominic. Look at you – ledgers, phone-calls, chasing up invoices... I'm crap at all that."

"We've got to get the sandwich bar off to a good start. No loose ends." He stood up. Do you want some pineapple cake? Nerissa's mum made it."

Just then the telephone rang. Dominic answered. He looked at me and pulled a melodramatic face. "Look, for the last time, I don't know where she is," he said, with completely implausible, fake-indignation.

I snatched the receiver. John sounded strangely distant as he gave me directions to the *Hotel Regency* near the airport where I had arrived only yesterday.

"A hotel?" I said. "But why?"

"Probably simplest," said John flatly. I ran my fingers over the fluffy sunflower-faces. Close up they looked fake and plasticky. "Meet me in the bar," he continued. "Tomorrow. Eight-thirty. You will be there?"

Chapter Forty-Four

I caught the 19.10 shuttle. It was heaving. Suit carriers, cases, hold-alls cluttered up the aisles. Business-men gazed into laptop screens. Four Italian students with rucksacks were yelling simultaneously into one mobile phone. *Va cagare! Va cagare!* I eventually slumped into a seat next to the window, managed, somehow, to smash my knee against a ridiculous little table – ouch, fuck - and then felt guilty as an elderly woman with a grip shuffled past. I was on the verge of getting up when she found a vacant place just behind me. *Patch, don't be so selfish ...* I cupped my hands on the window against the light and stared out. Suburban back gardens. A family, behind French windows, having supper. An old quarry. Black willows along the river-bank reaching for the rising moon.

The old woman in the seat behind me was droning on and on:

... I blame it on the Council. I mean, you don't even get a cup of tea these days ...

I wondered why John had suggested an airport hotel. Maybe he had a flight to catch in the morning. I pondered on what he might want to say to me. Try as I might, I was unable to imagine any positive scenario. I kept picturing some awful scene after which I had to find my way home at night ...

... queuing for hours, and then I get this Indian doctor. ...

Pale lights marked the tiny country stations we raced through. They looked pathetically redundant alongside a three-track, high-speed rail-link.

... it's those bogus asylum-seekers. Mind you, I'm not racist, or anything ...

The old woman was in her stride. Her interminable, xenophobic muttering was beginning to unsettle me. I wished I hadn't sat where I had. Fields and ditches dashed by in indifferent shades of grey. A coal yard. Out of nowhere, a multicoloured, Tyrolean franchise-restaurant. *All you can eat – only £5.99.* A sign for *Old Prospect Wood*: a break in the clouds revealed a clearing, silver with wild daffodils.

... and tattoos on women. I mean, it's not right, is it? ...

The train slowed at the station and stopped.

“Thank you for travelling on the *Airport Express*,” said a tape-recording, running ever so slightly too fast. “We hope you have a pleasant trip.”

Everyone struggled towards the doors, yanking and heaving themselves and their luggage. I waited till the aisle had cleared and stood up. Just before I set off, I happened to glance at the old woman. She was still muttering away.

... *They're just a load of savages. I'd like to round the lot of them up ...*

The seat next to hers was empty.

I hopped a cab to the *Hotel Regency* and walked into the foyer. Repro-Stubbs and -Gainsboroughs in gilt frames. Satinated wallpaper. Apricot and cream. Green and gold. Next to me, at the *Northanger Bar*, a man with an expense account bought himself doubles with weary resignation. What on earth had possessed John to ask me here? More precisely, what on earth had induced me to come? I hovered, debating with myself whether to go back out through the revolving doors.

"Patch?"

John was standing by the reception desk. God, he'd lost a lot of weight. There was a greyish sheen to his face. He needed a shave. "Thanks for coming," he said, pressing the lift button. "I really appreciate it." He looked exhausted and not entirely pleased to see me. I stopped worrying about following him up to his room.

As the lift ascended, I caught a glimpse of myself in its shiny metal mirrors. They had been tinted to make you look tanned. At the third floor, we got out and walked to the end of a Burgundy corridor. John pushed open a door. At first I thought we'd come to the wrong room: a joyless brunette was sitting on the sofa to my right. Designer shades. Cashmere suit. I assumed she must be foreign. I was suddenly aware of my own shabbiness. She sniffed.

Then another door opened. No one said a word. "Please tell me what's going on," I whispered.

"Hello Patch." Philip Jacobs, Tina's old manager, walked forwards into the light.

I stared at the three faces: John; Phil; the silent, foreign woman. A fine shawl pinned at the woman's throat reminded me of the soft wool I'd once seen featured on a television exposé. *Shatoosh: the illegal trade in Himalayan antelope fur*. The woman sniffed again.

"Sorry it's all a bit cloak-and-dagger, love," said Phil, as he rearranged the shawl on the woman's shoulders. One of the spotlights above my head buzzed. "Tina's been dying to see you again. Haven't you, sweetheart?"

I felt sick. I thought I was going to faint.

Silvery bracelets tinkled on the woman's tiny wrist as she raised her cigarette to her mouth. She didn't answer. Phil bent to kiss the woman. She took another drag on her cigarette and he moved away. I heard the bubbling of catarrh in the back of her throat. She coughed.

“Tina came back last week from a *World-Wildlife* promotion, Patch,” said Phil. “Tina’s dead keen on wildlife. Done loads of fundraising, ain’t you, darlin’?” Phil removed her glasses. “There, that’s better.”

Tina. No watery grave. No bleached bones jammed between rocks, only visited by gulls and gannets. No silent horror in the rotting hulk of a sunken liner. She was here, a woman with a complexion desiccated by sun; lifeless hair that looked greenish under the spotlights. Her eyes seemed to have collapsed slightly, making her gaze seem dull and cloudy. She fingered a milky, opal earring.

I began to cry.

“What my girl don’t know about conservation ain’t worth knowing. Come on, Tina. Ain’t you going to give your kid sis a smacker then?”

Tina’s coral lips parted to bare neat, pearly teeth. “So,” she said. “He’s fucking you now, is he?” She stood up and replaced her sunglasses. “Well, have fun.”

“Tina?” I walked towards her. “Tina, please ...”

She turned her back on me. “Come on, Phil, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Stay here, Patch,” said John, quietly, and followed Phil and Tina into the corridor. I heard whispering. When he came back in, he sat down heavily on the sofa. “She’s lived with Phil,” he said. “In Spain. For the last fifteen years.”

I couldn’t stop shivering. “She let me think – you let me think –” I stuttered. “All this time.” I sank to the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees. “Why?” My voice sounded tight and small.

“Money. Phil always knew he’d make a fortune out of her disappearance. They planned it together.”

“And you went along with it?”

He spoke quietly. “Yes, Patch, I went along with it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. That was the deal.”

“Deal?” I was suddenly engulfed by a wave of unbearable weariness. I heard the roar of jet engines in the distance. Through the wall, the faint but unmistakable muzak and orgasmic gasping of a pay-as-you-view porno channel. “I’d like to go now.” I stood up and walked towards the door.

“Patch.” As I reached for the door handle, he said, “You should know what happened.”

I released the door-handle and walked over to the picture window overlooking the sodium lights of the airport complex. There was silence. "So?" I said at last. "I'm listening."

"Difficult to know where to start."

Through the window, I saw a Hackney Cab turn off the dual carriageway and pull up next to the forecourt below.

"I'd know for ages that I'd have to leave Tina," John began quietly, "but I couldn't – not while she was such a mess. The months kept ticking by. There didn't seem to be any improvement."

I watched Phil stride across the hotel forecourt, towards the waiting taxi. He surveyed the surrounding area and then quickly bundled Tina inside. The last I saw of her was an eel-skin handbag. Phil slammed the door. I tried to concentrate on what John was saying.

"One evening, about six months before Tina went, I was feeling really miserable. She'd had a huge tax bill. Doing Charlie like there was no tomorrow. I hadn't worked for the best part of a year. We were stuffed. I went to see Francesca." He paused. "She had enough on her plate, taking care of Freddie. We had a bit too much to drink."

I realised there was something cathartic in all this for John. I nodded.

He went on. "Francesca was straight up with me from the beginning about not leaving Freddie. We were both saddled with responsibility – but we could rely on each other. And it felt good. For both of us. Francesca was anxious that Freddie shouldn't find out about us. We were careful and discreet."

"Obviously not careful enough." It was the first thing I had said for a good ten minutes.

"Someone had it in for us. An envelope addressed to Tina was shoved through the letterbox. Inside was a Polaroid of me and Francesca."

I watched a plane descend slowly, red lights winking, and disappear behind the terminal building. "Dawn Potts" I said.

"I twigged as much after that mess at the funeral." He tried a smile. "I'm glad you busted her mouth as well." His smile waned and he went on. "I found Tina in the garage, slumped over the steering wheel of my car. Engine running. Luckily, she hadn't been there long. Still conscious." John didn't look at me. "I was scared stupid. Woke Phil. He tried to patch things up between us. Tina wasn't having any of it." Through the window, I watched the metallic *Hotel Regency* sign revolve on the forecourt. "That was when you turned up," said John. "I didn't want you to hear what was going on."

“So you took me back to Francesca’s.”

He nodded. A little hatchback parked in front of the hotel. *Broken down?* it said on the side. *We’ll soon have you moving. Bains’ Garage Courtesy Vehicle.* John continued. “When I got back to *Woodside*, Phil said Tina was going to live with him. I knew Phil had always been crazy about her. I said, fine, if that was what she wanted. Tina said she wanted to go with a bang, and brought up this idea of disappearing. It wasn’t the first time she’d suggested it. She and Phil had cooked up a similar scheme a year or so before, to coincide with the launch of an album but I’d refused to go along with it.”

Down on the road below us, an executive saloon slid noiselessly by. A suit carrier containing a change of clothes swung from a hook by the back seat.

“Phil was really excited,” said John. “Kept going on about publicity and royalties. Promised Tina he’d turn her into a legend. He’d managed to get Tina caught up in it all as well. I told him he was a twat and that he could count me out. Phil offered me money.”

“You didn’t have to accept it.”

“I didn’t.” John’s voice was quiet. “I didn’t want Phil’s lousy money.

“So how did they persuade you to co-operate?” I asked at last, coming away from the window.

“Tina threatened to go to the newspapers about my affair with Francesca. Said she’d hand over the photograph.”

I could imagine what the press would have made of it. Freddie was, even then, well-respected in diplomatic circles. John wasn’t an unknown name and Tina was never out of the papers. I thought of Annabel Lacey. Just the sort of scandal she would love to serve up, alongside a recipe for salmon-dip, in her crappy little tabloid. The sludgy sax from the porno channel next door stopped briefly. There was a short interlude of unintelligible dialogue, and then the music started again, accompanied by more groaning.

“I didn’t see I had a choice,” said John, quietly; “after all Francesca had done for me.”

He looked all-in. I suddenly realised what losing her must have meant to him. I touched his arm. “Do you want some coffee?” I asked.

He nodded.

I boiled the kettle and emptied sachets of instant into the tiny cups. “Did you ever let Francesca in on the secret?” I asked, handing John a cup.

He shook his head. “Of course not.”

I sat next to him on the settee and tried to imagine the intolerable pressure of keeping the truth about Tina's disappearance quiet all these years. As I sipped my coffee, something struck me. "How did you get them to agree to meet me?"

"It didn't take much. Phil's terrified I'll go to the police." John put his cup and saucer aside. The gasping and groaning of the porno-channel next door grew louder. "Patch, do you mind if we get out of here? It's doing my head in."

We took the stairs to the *Regency's* catacomb car park and climbed into John's car. He didn't start the engine. "Where to?" he asked, quietly.

"I'm not sure," I said. "John, I need to tell you something. I don't want any more secrets."

Afterwards, he sat for ages with his hands on the steering wheel, staring out at the metal lifts, concrete pillars, signs that said *Exit. One Way Only. Hamilton Carvery – food for thought*. A lift slid open and three Japanese businessmen stepped out like a conjuring-trick.

"Tibi," said John, finally.

I made no reply.

"What was he like?"

I shrugged. "Kind. Sorted." I paused. "Not you."

"What did he do?"

"Optician."

He was trying not to let it show, but I could tell it had hurt him badly. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

Without warning, he started to cry. No sound – just great, wracking spasms that made his back heave. Under different circumstances, I might even have thought he was laughing. "Can you go away Patch?" he managed. He turned his face away from me. "Just for a minute. Please?"

I couldn't bear it. I put my arms around him as if he were a child. I told him how much I loved him.

He buried his face in my hair. "God, I thought I'd never see you again," he groaned, and hugged me so tight I could hardly breathe.

Chapter Forty-Five

That night, I had the strangest dream. I'd been a small child again, hopping up and down next to the left luggage booth at the railway station, waving off the train that was taking my sister to school. As the train disappeared over the horizon, I'd looked about the vast terminus. It was entirely deserted.

The following morning as I awoke, memories of the previous night returned. The meaningless, fifteen-years-too-late, reunion in a chain-hotel room. As John had driven us back up the motorway, towards London, he'd explained how the plan had been executed: Tina had driven her car to *Boddle Head* where one of Phil's hired side-kicks was waiting. Phil had stressed the importance of Tina driving her car, in case she was spotted by someone on the way. Tina had been drinking and snorting and was, of course, an absolute mess by that time. Phil asked John to follow her at a discreet distance to make sure she arrived safely.

Side-kick had pushed Tina's car over the cliffs, then driven Tina to the South Coast where she'd been *Gypsy-Mothed* across the channel. From a deserted airfield in Northern France, she'd been taken, by car, to Phil's house in Spain. I'd imagined barbed wire fencing, security cameras and electric gates protecting a Cinderella movie-palace. It was only once she was out of the country that John reported Tina missing.

I nuzzled into the pillow and mulled over in my mind the pale residue of Tina I had carried around with me. The album covers. The tour-jackets. Emblazoned baseball-caps. *Thin Air – feel the dream*. The well-thumbed teenage magazines with her interviews plastered over the centre pages. *Favourite colour – candy-pink (I've always fancied a candy-pink stretch-limo)...* *Favourite food – chip butties (though I'd never admit it – ha, ha)...* *Who would you most like to be? Me, me, meeeee!* I suddenly realised how little it all added up to. For half my life, I'd been grieving over a suitcaseful of crap.

Next to me, John murmured something in his sleep. I could hear the slow in-out of his breathing. The window next to me was open slightly and the curtains flapped in the breeze.

It was gone midnight by the time John and I had drawn up in a small, residential street in North London. "Come on, Patch," said John, undoing his seatbelt.

He hadn't headed towards one of the houses, but instead, turned down a small alleyway, clambered over a wooden stile and onto the towpath adjacent to the Regents Canal.

We'd walked between undulating boats and the back gardens of townhouses and stopped next to a small narrow-boat. John jumped onto the deck.

I'd frowned. "John, what are you playing at? You'll get us arrested."

"Relax," he said. "Belongs to a couple of friends. They're on tour with the RSC."

As John bent to insert the keys into a small door, painted with folksey garlands, I heard familiar barking. "There's someone here who'll be pleased to see you," John smiled. Emil had been as delighted with the unexpected reunion as I was. I'd kissed his doggy face and cuddled him while he made little grumbly sounds of ecstasy. I hadn't even minded his atomic farting. We'd collapsed, all three of us, onto the pull-out double bed and fallen asleep almost immediately.

I stretched and yawned. Through the open window I could hear the hum of traffic; an animated conversation in Urdu; a whistled fragment of an old music hall song as someone strolled along the towpath. From the foot of the bed came a wheezy whine and the lazy thud of tail on duvet. I reached down and fondled Emil's ears, then rolled over and propped myself up on one elbow. John's face was partially covered by the bedspread. He was frowning slightly. He looked somehow younger asleep, like the John I had known, all those years ago. I remembered how, sometime in the small hours, as the water lapped gently against the side of the boat, we'd gravitated towards one another in the dark. I remembered the exploratory first kiss, the fierce pleasure of his touch, the dreamlike, wordless coupling that had brought the world spinning and juddering to a halt.

I pulled back the duvet, bent down and kissed the velvety skin beneath his ear.

"Morning," I whispered.

"Mm."

"Shall I make some tea?"

"Uh." He opened one eye and squinted at me.

I shrugged on John's dressing gown. The kitchen was a galley affair in the middle of the boat that opened out onto a small living space. I pulled back the ruched, floral curtains and looked out across the canal. It was a beautiful April morning. On the opposite bank, an old woman in carpet slippers pulled a bread wrapper from her pocket. Mallards and Moorhens congregated quickly, jostling one another for prime position. Sparrows hopped, nimble and hopeful at the water's edge. I filled the kettle, lit the stove and searched the cupboards for cups. I could only find one - one of the four I had bought him that day, back in

November, when we'd shopped for Elaine's scarf. It felt like a lifetime ago. "John," I called. "Any more mugs?"

He grunted. "Somewhere." He padded, naked, through into the tiny kitchen, rubbing his eyes and hunching his big frame against the narrowness of the passageway. He stubbed his toe ("fuck"), reached inside a cupboard and pulled out a cardboard box. "In here, I think." John proceeded to unload the contents: bin-liners, a frying pan, books (*Astronomy for Beginners*, a set of boyhood sporting annuals, a lavishly illustrated volume on Egyptology). No cups. As he re-loaded the box, I noticed a photo in a clipframe resting on the top of a calor-gas heater. I studied it. The cast of some Jacobean drama smiled or pulled silly faces. John wore, as well as doublet-and-hose, an Alice-band with springy antennae. He noticed me smiling. "That was last summer. *The Duchess of Malfi*," he said, grinning.

"Looks like fun," I said.

"Yeah," he nodded. "More severed hands than you've had hot dinners. Good production, too. Do you know the play?"

"No." I suddenly realised that this was a whole side to John I knew nothing about. "I'd love to see you in something," I said.

"Sure, as long as it's some good." He re-loaded the box again and frowned as he surveyed the tiny living area. A suitcase containing a jumble of socks and T-shirts lay open on top of a small, four-seater table. A pair of slightly-chewed trainers in the corner. A jacket flung over a portable television. "Sorry, Patch, it's all a bit of a mess at the moment."

"What's happened to *Woodside*?" I asked.

"Elaine bought it."

"Oh, John." I remembered all the careful work he had lavished onto the place.

He shrugged. "To tell you the truth, it never really felt like mine."

"Where's all your stuff?"

"Stables. Elaine let me store it there. Some things of yours there, too. And your car."

"How long have you lived here?"

"A month. *Fallowfield* went at auction at the beginning of March. The guys who own this place lent it to me until I get myself sorted. Technically," he grinned. "I'm homeless at the moment."

"Yeah, well," I said, kissing his cheek. "So am I, only in my case there's no 'technically' about it."

He pulled out another small box from under one of the screwed-down benches and rifled through. Football boots (I hadn't known John played); a framed engraving that explained how to cast a bell, a pair of Y-fronts that had seen better days. No cups. "Can't find a bloody thing," he grumbled.

The kettle started to whistle. I shoved a teabag into the mug and poured boiling water on it. "Never mind," I said. "Let's share this one."

John straightened up and trod in the half-full bowl of water that Emil had chased to the middle of the floor. He swore. "Patch," he pronounced, solemnly, as he reached for a dishcloth, "we need somewhere to live."

I nodded and tried to look serious, though a smile was threatening to engulf my entire face. "Where?" I said, in an attempt at practicality.

"Don't mind. How about you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. The smile had got the better of me.

Chapter Forty-Six

Caribbean Fruit Punch

Marinated Cornish Hens

Jerked Mako Shark

Jamaican Grilled Mixed Vegetables

Green Mango Salad

Grilled Sweet Potato

Roasted Dumplings

Lime Pie

Rum Coffee

Wedding Cake

Chapter Forty-Seven

The last Saturday in August, the sky was as blue as blue. South-London high-rises gleamed. Tarmac roads sweated in the afternoon heat.

The market at *The Mills* was heaving. A steel band on the bandstand competed with piped whale-song from the New Age stall that sold bongos, soapstone trinket-boxes and crushed-velvet smock-tops. *Scorpio. Eco-Friendly Fashions*. Blue lines of smoke rose from joss-sticks. The confused scent of stocks and freesias from an adjacent flower-stall made me heady. We parked outside *The Humming Bird*, Nerissa's Mum's restaurant, next to the river. The chalk-board-gorilla outside said *Sorry, closed for private party*. The door swung open.

Nerissa was beaming in rose and lime.

"Oh" I said, frailly, as I gazed, incredulous.

Click. Applause and cheers.

Dominic ducked to avoid a huge green paper macaw. Slowly, mechanically, it rose to the ceiling again. A parliament of golden suns shone overhead. Painted monkeys chased each other around the walls or peek-a-booped through the lush foliage. Three huge fans whirled and rustled streamers across the restaurant. Cargo nets, multicoloured balloons ...

In a flash I understood the reason for the *sotto voce* telephone calls, the afternoons where *just popping out* had meant an absence of a couple of hours.

"Out the way, John! We can't see the bride!"

Click. Emil barking at a carnival-float devil who brandished his pitchfork at bosomy papier-mâché angels.

Click. John and me, framed in the doorway, confetti tumbling around us in a great flamingo snowstorm. In years to come that would be my favourite picture of the day.

Click. Nerissa catching the bouquet: bird of paradise flowers bound together with sisal. Dominic walking backwards with a camera in front of his face.

Click. Miranda, Nerissa's mum, presiding over a gigantic punchbowl, smiling a warm Jamaican welcome.

"It's just ... amazing," I said at last and buried my face in her lime-green shoulder.

John gave Nerissa a kiss. "You've worked magic," he said.

Nerissa fingered the flowers and looked pleased. "Turned out nice, hasn't it?"

John bowed slightly. "*I multiply With one 'We thank you', many thousands more That go before it.*"

“What are you like, John?” Nerissa chuckled, and straightened his tie.

Click. Agi torturing an embroidered hanky. “Oh, *Emikém*” she choked. “My little bird. My treasure. I am so proud.”

Feri smiled. “Aloha!”

My outfit had been assembled by Nerissa. Any input by me had been brushed aside kindly, but firmly. A tangerine dress and an enormous mauve hat, decorated with silk passion-flowers and tiny blue birds. I was beginning to get the hang of the scarlet platforms, Nerissa had chosen for me, but I still wobbled a bit. I gave Agi a kiss.

“Show your mettle, John! Look doting.” Philly tugged a camera, tangled in paper-tissues, from her pocket. “Hugh, what am I supposed to press?” She inadvertently took a picture of Hugh’s shoes.

John grinned. She tried again.

Click.

“Splendid, darlings. I do love alternative weddings. Ours was so prosaic and middle class, wasn’t it, Hugh? Perfectly ghastly.”

Hugh smiled. “How’s the music coming on, Patch?” he asked.

Philly had fixed me up with a flautist friend looking for an accompanist. “Great, thanks. We’re practising like mad.”

Ricky strolled up. “Wotcha, darlin’” he said, giving me a bear-hug. “You look a million dollars.”

“Hello, gorgeous,” said Sue, giving John a kiss. “Come and visit us soon. We’re practically neighbours now.”

John and I had just exchanged contracts on a place in Wandsworth – about ten minutes drive from my old flat. Threadbare carpets, woodchip walls, boarded-up chimneys. At the viewing, I had pulled off a piece of hardboard to reveal the garnet-coloured tiles on the fireplace behind.

“Eric, Eric” shrieked Jimmy, tugging at his brother’s sleeve and pointing to the stuffed gibbon that climbed the wall behind the bar. “It’s got a blue arse!” He and Eric laughed hysterically.

“Behave, lads!”

Click.

Ricky lit a cigarette and offered me one.

I shook my head. “Given up.”

“Since when?”

“Ricky, I told you,” said Sue.

Sue and I had become good friends. I’d popped round to see her once, while John was working on a production up North somewhere. After that, we’d met regularly for a walk on the common and a chat. Emil had instantly acquired two bosom buddies in Eric and Jimmy.

Sue smiled at me. “Never listens to a word I say. I’m quitting too, next month,” she confided. Booked myself a course of hypnotherapy.”

“Forty quid a session” moaned Ricky. “Cheaper to carry on smoking if you ask me.”

“That man’s all heart.” Susan prodded her husband sharply in the gut.

Ricky recovered – “up yer bum” – and drained his tumbler of punch.

“You’re driving, Ricky” said Susan.

“Fuck it” he said, affluently. “We’ll grab a cab. Make a change to sit in the passenger seat for once.”

“Kizame-zuki” screamed Eric. “Haaaia!”

Click.

He punched the green paper parrot as it swooped again. All that rose to the ceiling next time was a tangle of twisted chicken-wire with two glass eyes. It would continue to descend throughout the afternoon like a flying car-crash.

There was a muffled explosion and the sound of breaking china. “For heaven’s sake, Hugh” barked Philly. “Champagne bottles should sigh when uncorked, like contented women. You nearly blew my head off!”

John and Philly had debated for days over champagnes. Miranda and Nerissa had produced a punch, afloat with fresh papaya, mango-slices and starfruit. They had a contact who had provided genuine Jamaican black-rum. Everything was delicious. Everything had been fussed over, discussed and re-discussed. As I sipped, I stared around the room at all the people. Feri had made friends with Emil and was feeding him cassava-bread dipped in jerk-sauce (Francesca had educated that dog’s palate to a level I found almost unbelievable).

Philly discovered Eric and Jimmy furtively swigging punch from discarded glasses. “You poor babies.” She immediately poured them each a glass of champagne. “Have they forgotten about you?” Philly raised her glass alone (the boys were already drinking). “*Per ardua ad astra!*”

Click.

Agi had discovered a soul-mate in Miranda. "I've never tasted anything so delicious. Never in my life." Agi was soon scribbling recipes on paper serviettes. "You really put *bananas* in this?"

I smiled as I saw John and Dominic deep in conversation. John had driven me over to the flat to pick up my things, the day after that awful reunion with Tina. I was surprised and pleased when he and Dom hit it off. They shared an interest in football and, in no time, were discussing the relative merits of the clubs they supported. After that, we would often meet on Saturday afternoons. John and Dominic would sit in front of the box opining earnestly. *Yeah, Rangers are very low on confidence this season... No doubt about it, he's a class player... Give me a break, he's shit...* Nerissa was also well up on the game, but mercifully would come to my rescue and whisk me off to *The Six Bells* if conversation became too arcane.

Miranda emerged from the kitchen swaying in time to the music. She was carrying an immense, fragrant cauldron.

"It smells terribly exotic" crooned Philly as the huge vessel floated past. "*Bali-hai – my magical island ...* (hic). What's in it?"

Miranda pursed her lips. "Missionary" she replied drily.

Philly shrieked and clapped her hands.

Click.

I remembered the peacocks.

After lunch, the tables and chairs were pushed to one end of the room. Nerissa had set up a limbo pole and Agi and Philly were taking it in turns to wiggle ineptly underneath. After each attempt, the cross-bar had to be replaced. Feri snored under an artificial palm tree.

The place was beginning to pack out. John had invited some of his theatre friends for the evening bash. Dominic was DJ-ing the disco. He looked snappy in wrap-around shades.

"Do you shoot?" Hugh was asking Ricky.

"No, I do karate."

"Impressive. Are you a black-belt?"

"Nearly" Ricky replied. "Brown with two white stripes"

I walked across the floor of the restaurant.

(“... Eric, come down! You’ll break your neck ...”)

I surveyed the trestle table laden with presents. I had no idea we knew so many people and was touched by everyone’s generosity. I noticed a card had fallen to the floor. I picked it up. It had been posted in Spain.

I walked out onto the riverbank and sat on a bench. Stall-holders were packing up, rolling tarpaulins and wrapping small objects in newspaper. Most of the flowers on the flower-stall had all been sold. The remainder had been deliberately snapped in half and pushed into a litter-bin – presumably they were only to be enjoyed if paid for. A tired woman in shorts and vest top had stacked buckets and was collecting up reels of satin ribbon. *A rose for all occasions* said a poster, Sellotaped to the edge of the trestle-table. I thought of Francesca.

I felt John’s hands on my shoulders. “*There you are*, Mrs Fairfax. I thought you’d done a runner.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “You should be so lucky.”

“It’s time to attack the wedding cake.” John must have noticed I was holding something. “What have you got there?”

“Card from Tina and Phil.”

“What does it say?”

Congratulations, from us both, in Phil’s un-joined up handwriting.

“Nothing, really,” I said, shutting the card and standing up.

John paused. “Are you alright?”

I smiled and kissed his cheek. “Fine,” I said.